A death in late Victorian Dublin

Keith Allan

http://profiles.arts.monash.edu.au/keith-allan/

This essay examines the language used when describing the 1895 death of Father Flynn in James Joyce's short story 'The Sisters' (Joyce 1914: 9-20). Father Flynn's death follows the paralysis that was the result of his third stroke. His physical and mental degeneration reputedly began after he broke the chalice at the Eucharist. The broken chalice and the priest's paralysis are a metaphor for the state of the Irish Church. It is Father Flynn's death resulting from central nervous system decay of a morally moribund Catholic priest, the rituals that precede and follow it, along with the attendant reactions from the characters in Joyce's story that form the substance for this essay on the language of death in late Victorian Dublin. Throughout the story Joyce makes recourse to a packet of scripts that plot the various aspects of death and the pragmemes that are components of those scripts. The scripts correspond to recurrent and largely predictable events such as: the administration of last rites, the report of death (which includes the pragmeme of death notices), the cause of death – which is the main focus of 'The Sisters', laying out of the body, paying respect to the dead person (which includes the pragmeme always speak well of the dead), and expressing empathy with the bereaved (which includes the pragmeme of condolence and the pragmeme of questioning the manner of dying). Although preparations for the funeral are briefly mentioned, no funeral is described, the likely reason for which is proposed.

Keywords: scripts, pragmemes, meningoencephalitis, dementia, paralysis, disease, Irish Catholic Church, mourning practices

1. Overview

James Joyce's short story 'The Sisters' from *Dubliners* (Joyce 1914: 9–20) is about the death of a priest, Father James Flynn. When coming to an understanding of this story it is helpful to establish as much common ground with Joyce as possible in order, as best we can, to recognise his likely presuppositions (Allan 2013, 2016 (unpublished), Stalnaker 1978, 2002, 2014). Educated by Jesuits and a devout Catholic when young, James Joyce became apostate at the age of 16 – according to a letter he wrote to his future wife in 1904:

> Six years ago I left the Catholic church, hating it most fervently. I found it impossible for me to remain in it on account of the impulses of my nature. I made secret war upon it when I was a student and declined to accept the positions it offered me. By doing this I made myself a beggar but I retained my pride. Now I make open war upon it by what I write and say and do. (Ellman 1975: 26)

The censorship imposed by the Church and its social and political oppression within Ireland (for instance it stood against Irish Home Rule) motivated Joyce's reaction to it in his writings. In a letter of 1906, Joyce wrote of *Dubliners*, which he was in the process of pulling together: 'My intention was to write a chapter of the moral history of my country and I chose Dublin for the scene because that city seemed to me the centre of paralysis' (Ellman 1966: 134). James' brother Stanislaus Joyce wrote 'The will to live, he would say, was paralyzed in Ireland' (Joyce & Giovanelli 1950: 497). Hence, Father Flynn, stricken with hemiplegia is a metaphor for priest-ridden and semi-paralysed contemporary Ireland. 'The Sisters' displays convincing evidence of moral paralysis in that Father Flynn died of what in Joyce's day was called 'general paralysis of the insane' (Waisbren & Walzl 1974); less euphemistically, it was chronic meningoencephalitis from a syphilitic infection that has caused gradual loss of cortical function, resulting in progressive dementia and generalized paralysis. Against this diagnosis of syphilis as the cause, for which there is no direct evidence, all the priest's symptoms could result from vascular dementia[1] caused by reduced blood supply to the brain due to diseased blood vessels – the outcome of an earlier stroke, the want of physical exercise, and/or overindulgence in alcohol and tobacco (Alzheimer's Society 2015, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vascular_dementia).

The story graphically describes the ritual and experiences of death and mourning in late Victorian Dublin. In doing so it calls on several scripts, i.e. stereotyped dynamic event sequences whose components are, typically, predictable (see Schank & Abelson 1977, Schank 1984 and Allan 2001 for more detail). Scripts are also called 'schemata' (Bartlett 1932, Mazzone 2011), 'scenarios' (Sanford & Garrod 1981), and 'Assumed Familiarity' (Prince 1981). The notion of scripts is extremely important because throughout 'The Sisters' Joyce makes recourse to a packet of scripts that plot the various aspects of death and the pragmemes that are components of those scripts. We can think of these scripts as forming the basis for the content of encyclopaedia entries under such headings as 'last rites', 'death notices', 'funeral', 'eulogy', 'wake', and so forth. Obviously scripts are based on practices

---

[1] I am grateful to Petra Hanzak (pc) for this insight.

and experiences within a particular community; in ‘The Sisters’ it is the Irish Catholic community of Dublin in the late Victorian era. There will be similarities with scripts in other communities that deal with comparable matters – in our case, dying and death. The scripts in ‘The Sisters’ correspond to recurrent and largely predictable events such as:

- the administration of last rites,
- the report of death (which includes the pragmeme of death notices),
- the cause of death – which is the main focus of ‘The Sisters’,
- legal notification of death – which is ignored in ‘The Sisters’,
- laying out of the body,
- paying respect to the dead person (which includes the pragmeme always speak well of the dead), and
- expressing empathy with the bereaved (which includes the pragmeme of condolence and the pragmeme of questioning the manner of dying).

Although preparations for the funeral are briefly mentioned, no funeral is described, probably because that would metaphorically correspond to the end of Ireland’s suffering. At about the time Joyce wrote ‘The Sisters’, he emigrated from Ireland; with poetic licence, we could say he left with Father Flynn.

2. ‘The Sisters’

Stanislaus Joyce wrote:

> In Joyce’s stories […] it is precisely the everyday life of his characters that claims his interest; and the plot, in itself so tenuous as scarcely to merit the name, serves only to illuminate a certain moment of that daily life. Judgment is always suspended. The author’s business is to narrate. (Joyce & Giovanelli 1950: 499)

And so it is with ‘The Sisters’. Ostensibly it is narrated by a pre-pubescent boy[2] of his first encounter with the death of someone close to him.[3] Father Flynn was a priest who had befriended and tutored the boy in Latin, history, as well as the complexities of Church institutions, ceremonies, and rituals. The priest was also said to have ‘had a great wish for him’ (Joyce 1914: 10), namely that the boy might in future be ordained. This echoes Joyce’s personal experience as reported in the autobiographical novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* when the Jesuit school director of Joyce’s alter ego Stephen Dedalus asks the boy

---

2 The narrator gets angry at being called a child (Joyce 1914: 11).

3 The boy lives with his uncle and aunt but nothing is said about the fate of his parents.

whether he has ‘a vocation’ and Stephen imagines himself ‘The Reverend Stephen Dedalus, S.J.’ (Joyce 1993: 140, 143). Stanislaus Joyce wrote of James’ education:

> The Jesuits enjoy the reputation of being good educators and no doubt they are; but entrusting impressionable boys to them in a country so Catholic as Ireland is not unattended by certain dangers. It is by no means a rare occasion that, taking advantage of the religious sensibility of adolescents, they try to persuade boys from rich or influential families, or those of superior intelligence, to join their order. (Joyce & Giovanelli 1950: 487)

We can ascertain by inference from the text that the story opens on Monday July 1st 1895[4] with the narrator awaiting the death of the old priest after his third stroke that has left him hemiplegic. Paralysis ‘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’ (p.9). So, when the boy walked by the priest’s lodgings above the Flynn sisters’ drapery shop on Great Britain Street,[5] he looked for the sign of death.

> If he was dead, I thought, I would see the reflection of candles on the darkened blind for I knew that two candles must be set at the head of a corpse. (p.9)

This invokes the Laying Out of the Body script, which the boy is evidently aware of.

As he sits down to his supper the narrator is told, ‘your old friend is gone, you’ll be sorry to hear’: a pragmeme of condolence here expressed as a standard commiserative announcement of death via the euphemism *going* from life on earth – to heaven in the case of a priest. But the narrator also learns that in the opinion of a neighbour, old Cotter, there had been ‘something queer’, ‘something uncanny about him’, echoing the boy’s own feeling that there was something ‘maleficent’ and ‘sinful’ in the priest’s illness. The neighbour and the narrator’s uncle hint that the closeness of the boy and priest might have given rise to the child being led astray. Today we might think of this as sexual abuse (cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Catholic_Church_sexual_abuse_scandal_in_Ireland), but instead the text suggests socio-cultural manipulation:

> “I wouldn’t like children of mine,” he said, “to have too much to say to a man like that.”
> “How do you mean, Mr Cotter?” asked my aunt.
> “What I mean is,” said old Cotter, “it’s bad for children. My idea is: let a young lad run about and play with young lads of his own age and not be.... Am I right, Jack?”

---

4 In giving the exact day I am perhaps influenced by the fact that the action of *Ulysses* (Joyce 1922) takes place in the 20 hrs beginning 8 a.m. on 16th June 1904.

5 In the 1920s it was renamed Parnell Street after nationalist politician Charles Stewart Parnell (1846–1891).

> "That's my principle, too," said my uncle. "Let him learn to box his corner. That's what I'm always saying to that Rosicrucian there: take exercise. Why, when I was a nipper every morning of my life I had a cold bath, winter and summer. And that's what stands to me now. Education is all very fine and large.
>
> […]
>
> "But why do you think it's not good for children, Mr Cotter?" [my aunt] asked.
>
> "It's bad for children," said old Cotter, "because their minds are so impressionable. When children see things like that, you know, it has an effect...." (p.11)

The adults' concern ties in with the priest's 'great wish' for the boy, mentioned above; and the teasing reference to him as a 'Rosicrucian' implicitly contrasts the boy's apparent interest in the Church as soft in contrast with the uncle's tougher preference for physical exercise and cold baths at all times of the year. The final remark from old Cotter alludes to the effect on the impressionable boy from seeing the priest's loss of cortical function, progressive dementia and generalized paralysis that had resulted from either syphilis or vascular disease.

That same night the boy narrator dreams that Father Flynn wants to confess to him a dire sin.

> The face of the paralytic […] began to confess to me in a murmuring voice and I wondered why it smiled continually and why the lips were so moist with spittle. (p.12)

Waisbren & Walzl 1974 point out that Joyce had been a drop-out medical student who, throughout his early life, retained an active interest in medicine. While writing 'The Sisters' Joyce's closest friend was medical student and poet Oliver Gogarty – fictionalised as Buck Mulligan in *Ulysses* (Joyce 1922) – who later became an ear-nose-and-throat specialist. As late as 1920 Joyce questioned in a letter whether he should not have continued with his medical studies (Waisbren & Walzl 1974: 758). Waisbren & Walzl link the quote above (from Joyce 1914: 12) to a description of symptoms listed under 'Paralysis, general, of the insane' in the celebrated medical textbook *The Principles and Practice of Medicine* (Osler 1902: 962).[6] Similar symptoms are found in patients with vascular dementia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vascular_dementia).

---

[6] Waisbren & Walzl 1974: 760 say that the 1902 fourth edition of Osler's handbook was available to Joyce from the Library of the Royal College of Physicians, but even if he had used some other source, it would have said much the same. My citing of Osler derives directly from Waisbren & Walzl's paper, especially from p.761.

On the following morning (Tuesday) the narrator goes to the drapery shop on Great Britain Street and finds the windows shuttered and an enactment of the script of Death Notices and its attendant pragmeme. The door-knocker has been beribboned (presumably in white) with the customary symbol for a dead occupant, a (presumably black) crape bouquet placed on the door with a card pinned to the crape identifying the deceased (p.12).

July 1st, 1895
The Rev. James Flynn (formerly of S. Catherine's
Church, Meath Street), aged sixty-five years.
R. I. P.

This is a minimal announcement of a death. Because its subject is a priest there is mention of his parish rather than his bereaved family. There is no mention of a funeral, and indeed the funeral is omitted from the story, though preparations for it are briefly described (p.18). One can only speculate that the priest's funeral would not fit with the metaphor of Ireland's continuing paralysis, as Joyce saw it; a state of affairs which caused him to emigrate. Had Father Flynn still been alive the boy would have visited him and found him 'sitting in his arm-chair by the fire, nearly smothered in his great-coat […] in a stupefied doze' (p.13), despite it being mid-summer with temperatures in the high teens (Celsius). The 'stupefied doze' is a symptom of the priest's malady, cf. Osler 1902: 246, 961, Alzheimer's Society 2015. And there is further evidence of his condition revealed on those occasions when the boy took him a present of snuff.

> It was always I who emptied the packet into his black snuff-box for his hands trembled too much to allow him to do this without spilling half the snuff about the floor.

Osler 1902: 962 writes of 'unsteadiness of the hand' in patients with syphilitic meningoencephalitis and it is also symptomatic of vascular dementia (Alzheimer's Society 2015, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vascular_dementia). The narrator recalls that the priest's clumsiness led to the snuff staining his handkerchief and vestments; it is later revealed to have had a more calamitous consequence (p.20).

Fear of death is a recurrent component of scripts concerning death and dying (for discussion and explanation see Allan & Burridge 1991, 2006). So, it is predictable that the boy is fearful of confrontation with the priest's corpse: 'I wished to go in and look at him but I had not the courage to knock.' Walking away from the drapery shop he feels no sense of mourning, but instead of having 'been freed from something by his death' (p.13). What is connoted here is liberty from moral depravity and the oppression of the Irish Catholic

Church. The narrator feels guilty because of the education he had received from Father Flynn. Since there is no funeral, there is no eulogy, so the boy's recollections of the priest at this point (pp.13–14) stand in place of that missing eulogy. A eulogy fulfils a pragmeme that can be expressed as a maxim: always speak well of the dead. Yet even here there is additional evidence of the dead priest's ailment (Osler 1902: 962, Alzheimer's Society 2015, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vascular_dementia):

> 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. (p.14)

That evening, when 'the window-panes of the houses that looked to the west reflected the tawny gold of a great bank of clouds', the boy accompanied his aunt back to the house of mourning. What follows is the standard script for Paying Respect to the Dead. They are met by the priest's sister Nannie and little or nothing is said, instead, hand gestures are used. Heads are bowed as a mark of respect. People tiptoe up the stairs and into 'the dead-room' to pay their respects (p.15). In accordance with the script for Laying Out of the Body, the blinds are drawn and candles are lit. The dead priest was coffined on his bed.

> Nannie gave the lead and we three knelt down at the foot of the bed. I pretended to pray but I could not gather my thoughts because the old woman's mutterings distracted me.

One is expected to pray under these circumstances (in accordance with the script Paying Respect to the Dead) but the boy is distracted by Nannie's mouthings and her down-at-heel clothing.[7] He fancies the dead priest also smiling benevolently but when the boy stands he sees almost the opposite:

> he was not smiling. There he lay, solemn and copious, vested as for the altar, his large hands loosely retaining a chalice. His face was very truculent, grey and massive, with black cavernous nostrils and circled by a scanty white fur. There was a heavy odour in the room—the flowers. (p. 16)

Joyce wordpaints a striking picture of a somewhat repulsive corpse. The full significance of the chalice is only later revealed (p.20) though it would be expected that the priest's hands would hold some sacred object. The aroma of managed death is cleverly captured in the reference to the smell of the flowers.

---

[7] The poverty of the Flynn siblings is specifically mentioned by Eliza on p.18; it is confirmed by their clothing, their lodgings, and their Irishtown origins.

The script for Paying Respect to the Dead continues with a wake, in this case not a prayer vigil but simply a social gathering following prayer. The mourners leave 'the dead-room' and return downstairs to join the second sister, Eliza, in the room where the priest and boy used to meet – Eliza occupying her brother's chair, the boy taking his usual place. Nannie brings out sherry and crackers; however, no one eats the crackers lest the dominating silence be broken.

> No one spoke: we all gazed at the empty fireplace. (p.16)

The empty fireplace is an indication that life has gone out of the room; it is a reminder of the emptiness that follows the death of a friend or loved one.

At last the boy's aunt continues the script by asking whether Father Flynn died peacefully – the pragmeme of questioning the manner of dying, expressed here through the standard benevolent wish for an easy death. Yet delicately she avoided explicit mention of death:

> '"Did he ... peacefully?" she asked'.
> "Oh, quite peacefully, ma'am," said Eliza. "You couldn't tell when the breath went out of him. He had a beautiful death, God be praised." (p.17)

Eliza is more forthcoming and yet utterly conventional in speaking well of her dead brother. This pattern of interchange continues as the women perform the Last Rites script.

> "And everything...?"
> "Father O'Rourke was in with him a Tuesday and anointed him and prepared him and all."
> "He knew then?"
> "He was quite resigned."
> "He looks quite resigned," said my aunt.
> "That's what the woman we had in to wash him said. She said he just looked as if he was asleep, he looked that peaceful and resigned. No one would think he'd make such a beautiful corpse."
> "Yes, indeed," said my aunt. (ibid.)

Father O'Rourke had visited a week earlier, fulfilling the Last Rites script by hearing the penance, anointing the dying man, and administering the viaticum – the Eucharist to prepare his fellow priest for his final journey from this life. Then, after death, in accordance with the Laying Out of the Body script, Father Flynn's body was washed and dressed to be coffined. Eliza may say that her brother made 'a beautiful corpse', to which the aunt politely accedes (Brown & Levinson 1987, Allan 2015) but the boy narrator's description was otherwise and more objectively honest; it was also repeated just before the story ends (p.20).

Eliza describes how exhausted she and Nannie are from making the funeral arrangements (part of the Funeral script) of acquiring the coffin and arranging a requiem mass, while appreciating that Father O'Rourke had assisted by bringing

> all them flowers and them two candlesticks out of the chapel and wrote out the notice for the *Freeman's General* and took charge of all the papers for the cemetery and poor James's insurance. (p.18)

In addition to her slightly substandard English, Eliza utters a malapropism with 'Freeman's General' and was presumably referring to *The Freeman's Journal*[8] which is a subtle Joycian indication that the sisters were not so well educated as their brother the priest, who had attended the Pontifical Irish College in Rome (p.13). There can be no doubt about this speculation because Eliza utters another malapropism a little later on, speaking of new-fangled carriages that run on 'rheumatic wheels' (p.19) instead of on *pneumatic* wheels (tyres).

There is a linguistically interesting passage directly following on from the quote above (Joyce 1914: 18) that involves an undermarked shift in reference from one priest to the other.

> "Wasn't that good of him?" said my aunt.
>
> Eliza closed her eyes and shook her head slowly.
>
> "Ah, there's no friends like the old friends," she said, "when all is said and done, no friends that a body can trust."
>
> "Indeed, that's true," said my aunt. "And I'm sure now that he's gone to his eternal reward he won't forget you and all your kindness to him." (p.18)

In the first paragraph here the aunt is praising Father O'Rourke for his support whereas in the last paragraph the co-text demands that she has to be referring to Father Flynn (invoking three scripts: Speak Well of the Dead, Express Empathy with the Bereaved, and Be Polite to Your Host).

Eliza soon starts to recall signs of her brother's medical disorder:

> She stopped, as if she were communing with the past and then said shrewdly:
>
> "Mind you, I noticed there was something queer coming over him latterly. Whenever I'd bring in his soup to him there I'd find him with his breviary fallen to the floor, lying back in the chair and his mouth open."
>
> She laid a finger against her nose and frowned.
>
> […]

---

[8] See http://www.nli.ie/blog/index.php/2012/08/21/thefreemansjournal/.

> "It was that chalice he broke.... That was the beginning of it. Of course, they say it was all right, that it contained nothing, I mean. But still.... They say it was the boy's fault. But poor James was so nervous, God be merciful to him!"
>
> "And was that it?" said my aunt. "I heard something...."
>
> Eliza nodded.
>
> "That affected his mind," she said. "After that he began to mope by himself, talking to no one and wandering about by himself. So one night he was wanted for to go on a call and they couldn't find him anywhere. They looked high up and low down; and still they couldn't see a sight of him anywhere. So then the clerk suggested to try the chapel. So then they got the keys and opened the chapel and the clerk and Father O'Rourke and another priest that was there brought in a light for to look for him.... And what do you think but there he was, sitting up by himself in the dark in his confession-box, wide-awake and laughing-like softly to himself?"
>
> She stopped suddenly as if to listen. I too listened; but there was no sound in the house: and I knew that the old priest was lying still in his coffin as we had seen him, solemn and truculent in death, an idle chalice on his breast.
>
> Eliza resumed:
>
> "Wide-awake and laughing-like to himself.... So then, of course, when they saw that, that made them think that there was something gone wrong with him...." (pp. 18–20)

All the worrying behaviours that Eliza observed in her brother – the apparent change in character that surprised his sisters, his clerk, and Father O'Rourke, his clumsiness, his fatigue and torpor, and his demented behaviour – are symptoms of both syphilitic meningo-encephalitis (Osler 1902: 246, 961, 962) and vascular dementia (Alzheimer's Society 2015, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vascular_dementia).

There is significant symbolism in the fact that Father Flynn's disorder has led him to drop two liturgical objects, his breviary with its instructions for conducting mass and other Church offices, and an empty chalice from which consecrated wine was drunk in memory of Jesus at the Last Supper; Joyce intends us to conclude that his religion was symbolically falling away from him in consequence of his sinful affliction. Since the chalice is the most important of sacred vessels and is often used as a metaphor for the blood of Christ, it is no great surprise that its falling away from him could trigger Father Flynn's dementia. There was indeed 'something gone wrong with him', and it led directly to his death.

3. Conclusion

In this essay, I discussed the death resulting from central nervous system disease of a Catholic priest in late Victorian Dublin. Throughout 'The Sisters', James Joyce makes recourse to a packet of scripts that plot the various aspects of death and the pragmemes that

are components of those scripts. Unease about death, if not fear of it, is a recurrent component of all scripts concerning death and dying. The scripts correspond to recurrent and largely predictable events such as:

the administration of last rites (the Last Rites script);
the report of death (the Death Notices script – which includes the pragmeme of death notices);
the cause of death – which is the main focus of 'The Sisters';
legal notification of death – which is ignored in 'The Sisters' (the Legal Notification of Death script);
laying out of the body (the Laying Out of the Body script);
paying respect to the dead person (Paying Respect to the Dead script – which includes the pragmeme always speak well of the dead);
expressing empathy with the bereaved (Express Empathy with the Bereaved script – which includes the pragmeme of condolence and the pragmeme of questioning the manner of dying);
the funeral (the Funeral script – which typically includes a eulogy) – is not described in 'The Sisters', though preparations for it are and a eulogy of sorts is included as part of paying respect to the late Father Flynn.

There is also the very generally applicable script Be Polite to Your Host, which is of no special interest to this volume, though it is of considerable importance in everyday life.

It is clear from 'The Sisters' that the events surrounding death and dying are stereotypical dynamic sequences whose components are, typically, predictable. There are speech acts associated with these events that are also in large measure predictable, and I have described them in terms of the pragmemes that are components of the relevant scripts. Obviously these scripts are based on practices and experiences within a particular community, in 'The Sisters' it is the Catholic community of Dublin in the late Victorian era. My aim has been to draw the reader's attention to the language of dying and death in this one community so as to be in a position to compare it with similar scripts in other communities.

References

Allan, Keith. 2001. *Natural Language Semantics*. Oxford & Malden MA: Blackwell.

Allan, Keith. 2013. What is common ground? In *Perspectives on Linguistic Pragmatics*, ed. by Alessandro Capone, Franco Lo Piparo & Marco Carapezza. Cham: Springer. Pp. 285-310.

Allan, Keith. 2015. A benchmark for politeness. In *Interdisciplinary Studies in Pragmatics, Culture and Society*, ed. by Jacob L. Mey & Alessandro Capone. Cham: Springer. Pp. 397-420.

Allan, Keith. 2016 (unpublished). Getting a grip on context. *http://users.monash.edu.au/~kallan/papers/c1-3.pdf*.

Allan, Keith & Kate Burridge. 1991. *Euphemism and Dysphemism: Language Used as Shield and Weapon*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Allan, Keith & Kate Burridge. 2006. *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Alzheimer's Society. 2015. What is vascular dementia? Factsheet 402LP. Alzheimer's Society. https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/site/scripts/documents_info.php?documentID=161 Alzheimer's Society.

Bartlett, Frederic C. 1932. *Remembering: An Experimental and Social Study*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Brown, Penelope & Stephen C. Levinson. 1987. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ellman, Richard, (ed.) 1966. *Letters of James Joyce, Vol. 2*. New York: Viking.

Ellman, Richard, (ed.) 1975. *Selected Letters of James Joyce*. London: Faber & Faber.

Joyce, James. 1914. *Dubliners*. London: Grant Richards.

Joyce, James. 1922. *Ulysses*. London: Published for the Egoist Press, London by John Rodker, Paris.

Joyce, James. 1993. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Ed. by R. Brandon Kershner. Boston/New York: Bedford Books of St Martin's Press. [First edition 1916, New York: B.W. Huebsch].

Joyce, Stanislaus & Felix Giovanelli. 1950. James Joyce: a memoir. *The Hudson Review* 2: 458-514.

Mazzone, Marco. 2011. Schemata and associative processes in pragmatics. *Journal of Pragmatics* 43: 2148-2159.

Osler, William. 1902. *The Principles and Practice of Medicine*. 4th edn. [First published 1892]. New York: D. Appleton & Co.

Prince, Ellen. 1981. Toward a taxonomy of given-new information. In *Radical Pragmatics*, ed. by Peter Cole. New York: Academic Press. Pp. 223–56.

Sanford, Anthony J. & Simon C. Garrod. 1981. *Understanding Written Language*. Chichester: John Wiley.

Schank, Roger. 1984. *The Cognitive Computer*. Reading MA: Addison-Wesley.

Schank, Roger & Robert C. Abelson. 1977. *Scripts, Plans, Goals and Understanding: An Inquiry into Human Knowledge Structures*. Hillsdale NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Stalnaker, Robert C. 1978. On the representation of context. *Journal of Logic, Language and Information* 7: 3-19. [Reprinted in Robert C. Stalnaker *Context and Content*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. 96-113.]

Stalnaker, Robert C. 2002. Common ground. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 25: 701-21.

Stalnaker, Robert C. 2014. *Context*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Waisbren, Burton A. & Florence L. Walzl. 1974. Paresis and the priest: James Joyce's symbolic use of syphilis in "The Sisters". *Annals of Internal Medicine* 80: 758-762.

Appendix

[p.9] THE SISTERS

THERE was no hope for him this time: it was the third stroke. Night after night I had passed the house (it was vacation time) and studied the lighted square of window: and night after night I had found it lighted in the same way, faintly and evenly. If he was dead, I thought, I would see the reflection of candles on the darkened blind for I knew that two candles must be set at the head of a corpse. He had often said to me: “I am not long for this world,” and I had thought his words idle. Now I knew they were true. 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.

Old Cotter was sitting at the fire, smoking, when I came downstairs to supper. While my aunt was ladling out my stirabout he said, as if returning to some former remark of his:

“No, I wouldn’t say he was exactly ... but there was something queer ... there was something uncanny about him. I’ll tell you my opinion....”

[p.10] He began to puff at his pipe, no doubt arranging his opinion in his mind. Tiresome old fool! When we knew him first he used to be rather interesting, talking of faints and worms; but I soon grew tired of him and his endless stories about the distillery.

“I have my own theory about it,” he said. “I think it was one of those ... peculiar cases.... But it’s hard to say....”

He began to puff again at his pipe without giving us his theory. My uncle saw me staring and said to me:

“Well, so your old friend is gone, you’ll be sorry to hear.”

“Who?” said I.

“Father Flynn.”

“Is he dead?”

“Mr Cotter here has just told us. He was passing by the house.”

I knew that I was under observation so I continued eating as if the news had not interested me. My uncle explained to old Cotter.

“The youngster and he were great friends. The old chap taught him a great deal, mind you; and they say he had a great wish for him.”

“God have mercy on his soul,” said my aunt piously.

Old Cotter looked at me for a while. I felt that his little beady black eyes were examining me but I would not satisfy him by looking up from my plate. He returned to his pipe and finally spat rudely into the grate.

[p.11]”I wouldn’t like children of mine,” he said, “to have too much to say to a man like that.”

“How do you mean, Mr Cotter?” asked my aunt.

“What I mean is,” said old Cotter, “it’s bad for children. My idea is: let a young lad run about and play with young lads of his own age and not be.... Am I right, Jack?”

“That’s my principle, too,” said my uncle. “Let him learn to box his corner. That’s what I’m always saying to that Rosicrucian there: take exercise. Why, when I was a nipper every morning of my life I had a cold bath, winter and summer. And that’s what stands to me now. Education is all very fine and large.... Mr Cotter might take a pick of that leg mutton,” he added to my aunt.

“No, no, not for me,” said old Cotter.

My aunt brought the dish from the safe and put it on the table.

“But why do you think it’s not good for children, Mr Cotter?” she asked.

“It’s bad for children,” said old Cotter, “because their minds are so impressionable. When children see things like that, you know, it has an effect....”

I crammed my mouth with stirabout for fear I might give utterance to my anger. Tiresome old red-nosed imbecile!

It was late when I fell asleep. Though I was angry with old Cotter for alluding to me as a child, I puzzled my head to extract meaning from his unfinished sentences. In the dark of my room I imagined that I saw again the heavy grey face *[p.12]* of the paralytic. I drew the blankets over my head and tried to think of Christmas. But the grey face still followed me. It murmured; and I understood that it desired to confess something. I felt my soul receding into some pleasant and vicious region; and there again I found it waiting for me. It began to confess to me in a murmuring voice and I wondered why it smiled continually and why the lips were so moist with spittle. But then I remembered that it had died of paralysis and I felt that I too was smiling feebly as if to absolve the simoniac of his sin.

The next morning after breakfast I went down to look at the little house in Great Britain Street. It was an unassuming shop, registered under the vague name of *Drapery*. The drapery consisted mainly of children’s bootees and umbrellas; and on ordinary days a notice used to hang in the window, saying: *Umbrellas Re-covered*. No notice was visible now for the shutters were up. A crape bouquet was tied to the door-knocker with ribbon. Two poor women and a telegram boy were reading the card pinned on the crape. I also approached and read:

July 1st, 1895
The Rev. James Flynn (formerly of S. Catherine’s
Church, Meath Street), aged sixty-five years.
R. I. P.

The reading of the card persuaded me that he was dead and I was disturbed to find myself at *[p.13]* check. Had he not been dead I would have gone into the little dark room behind the shop to find him sitting in his arm-chair by the fire, nearly smothered in his great-coat. Perhaps my aunt would have given me a packet of High Toast for him and this present would have roused him from his stupefied doze. It was always I who emptied the packet into his black snuff-box for his hands trembled too much to allow him to do this without spilling half the snuff about the floor. 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.

I wished to go in and look at him but I had not the courage to knock. I walked away slowly along the sunny side of the street, reading all the theatrical advertisements in the shopwindows as I went. I found it strange that neither I nor the day seemed in a mourning mood and I felt even annoyed at discovering in myself a sensation of freedom as if I had been freed from something by his death. I wondered at this for, as my uncle had said the night before, he had taught me a great deal. He had studied in the Irish college in Rome and he had taught me to pronounce Latin properly. He had told me stories about the catacombs and about Napoleon *[p.14]* Bonaparte, and he had explained to me the meaning of the different ceremonies of the Mass and of the different vestments worn by the priest. Sometimes he had amused himself by putting difficult questions to me, asking me what one should do in certain circumstances or whether such and such sins were mortal or venial or only imperfections. His questions showed me how complex and mysterious were certain institutions of the

Church which I had always regarded as the simplest acts. The duties of the priest towards the Eucharist and towards the secrecy of the confessional seemed so grave to me that I wondered how anybody had ever found in himself the courage to undertake them; and I was not surprised when he told me that the fathers of the Church had written books as thick as the *Post Office Directory* and as closely printed as the law notices in the newspaper, elucidating all these intricate questions. Often when I thought of this I could make no answer or only a very foolish and halting one upon which he used to smile and nod his head twice or thrice. Sometimes he used to put me through the responses of the Mass which he had made me learn by heart; and, as I pattered, he used to smile pensively and nod his head, now and then pushing huge pinches of snuff up each nostril alternately. When he smiled he used to uncover his big discoloured teeth and let his tongue lie upon his lower lip—a habit which had made me feel uneasy in the beginning of our acquaintance before I knew him well.

[p.15] As I walked along in the sun I remembered old Cotter's words and tried to remember what had happened afterwards in the dream. I remembered that I had noticed long velvet curtains and a swinging lamp of antique fashion. I felt that I had been very far away, in some land where the customs were strange—in Persia, I thought.... But I could not remember the end of the dream.

In the evening my aunt took me with her to visit the house of mourning. It was after sunset; but the window-panes of the houses that looked to the west reflected the tawny gold of a great bank of clouds. Nannie received us in the hall; and, as it would have been unseemly to have shouted at her, my aunt shook hands with her for all. The old woman pointed upwards interrogatively and, on my aunt's nodding, proceeded to toil up the narrow staircase before us, her bowed head being scarcely above the level of the banister-rail. At the first landing she stopped and beckoned us forward encouragingly towards the open door of the dead-room. My aunt went in and the old woman, seeing that I hesitated to enter, began to beckon to me again repeatedly with her hand.

I went in on tiptoe. The room through the lace end of the blind was suffused with dusky golden light amid which the candles looked like pale thin flames. He had been coffined. Nannie gave the lead and we three knelt down at the foot of the bed. I pretended to pray but I could not gather my thoughts because the old woman's mutterings distracted me. *[p.16]* I noticed how clumsily her skirt was hooked at the back and how the heels of her cloth boots were trodden down all to one side. The fancy came to me that the old priest was smiling as he lay there in his coffin.

But no. When we rose and went up to the head of the bed I saw that he was not smiling. There he lay, solemn and copious, vested as for the altar, his large hands loosely retaining a chalice. His face was very truculent, grey and massive, with black cavernous nostrils and circled by a scanty white fur. There was a heavy odour in the room—the flowers.

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

My aunt waited until Eliza sighed and then said:

"Ah, well, he's gone to a better world."

Eliza sighed again and bowed her head in assent. *[p.17]* My aunt fingered the stem of her wine-glass before sipping a little.

"Did he ... peacefully?" she asked.

"Oh, quite peacefully, ma'am," said Eliza. "You couldn't tell when the breath went out of him. He had a beautiful death, God be praised."

"And everything...?"

"Father O'Rourke was in with him a Tuesday and anointed him and prepared him and all."

"He knew then?"

"He was quite resigned."

"He looks quite resigned," said my aunt.

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

"Yes, indeed," said my aunt.

She sipped a little more from her glass and said:

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

Eliza smoothed her dress over her knees.

"Ah, poor James!" she said. "God knows we done all we could, as poor as we are—we wouldn't see him want anything while he was in it."

Nannie had leaned her head against the sofa-pillow and seemed about to fall asleep.

"There's poor Nannie," said Eliza, looking at her, "she's wore out. All the work we had, she and me, getting in the woman to wash him and then laying *[p.18]* him out and then the coffin and then arranging about the Mass in the chapel. Only for Father O'Rourke I don't know what we'd have done at all. It was him brought us all them flowers and them two candlesticks out of the chapel and wrote out the notice for the *Freeman's General* and took charge of all the papers for the cemetery and poor James's insurance."

"Wasn't that good of him?" said my aunt.

Eliza closed her eyes and shook her head slowly.

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

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

"Ah, poor James!" said Eliza. "He was no great trouble to us. You wouldn't hear him in the house any more than now. Still, I know he's gone and all to that...."

"It's when it's all over that you'll miss him," said my aunt.

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

She stopped, as if she were communing with the past and then said shrewdly:

"Mind you, I noticed there was something queer coming over him latterly. Whenever I'd bring in his soup to him there I'd find him with his breviary *[p.19]* fallen to the floor, lying back in the chair and his mouth open."

She laid a finger against her nose and frowned: then she continued:

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

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

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

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

"Yes," said my aunt. "He was a disappointed man. You could see that."

A silence took possession of the little room and, under cover of it, I approached the table and tasted my sherry and then returned quietly to my chair in the corner. Eliza seemed to have fallen into a deep revery. We waited respectfully for her to break the silence: and after a long pause she said slowly:

[p.20] "It was that chalice he broke.... That was the beginning of it. Of course, they say it was all right, that it contained nothing, I mean. But still.... They say it was the boy's fault. But poor James was so nervous, God be merciful to him!"

"And was that it?" said my aunt. "I heard something...."

Eliza nodded.

"That affected his mind," she said. "After that he began to mope by himself, talking to no one and wandering about by himself. So one night he was wanted for to go on a call and they couldn't find him anywhere. They looked high up and low down; and still they couldn't see a sight of him anywhere. So then the clerk suggested to try the chapel. So then they got the keys and opened the chapel and the clerk and Father O'Rourke and another priest that was there brought in a light for to look for him.... And what do you think but there he was, sitting up by himself in the dark in his confession-box, wide-awake and laughing-like softly to himself?"

She stopped suddenly as if to listen. I too listened; but there was no sound in the house: and I knew that the old priest was lying still in his coffin as we had seen him, solemn and truculent in death, an idle chalice on his breast.

Eliza resumed:

"Wide-awake and laughing-like to himself.... So then, of course, when they saw that, that made them think that there was something gone wrong with him...."