James Joyce's "Grace": A Literary Fugue

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James Joyce's intimate knowledge of classical literature became so much a part of the furniture of his mind that he consciously and subconsciously incorporated its imagery, form, and ideas into his own writings. Because he had so thoroughly assimilated classical and biblical writings, his own were greatly shaped and intensely colored by their vibrant hues. Furthermore, his genius was so great that he was able to orchestrate several of their influences in form and imagery into a homogenius whole in the same way that a great composer creates a fugue. In spite of the fact that each scholarly proponent of a particular concept of the form of Joyce's story, "Grace," seems to think that his identification of the author's governing structure excludes the possibility of the presence of another influencing form, a careful examination of the story seems to warrant a fugue–type theory because Joyce used several classical forms in its structure. He did so that his reader might comprehensively approach its theme from several different vantage points in the same way that a composer of a fugue explores a musical theme. He has blended the point–counterpoint of Christian (medieval and modern) with pagan thought in such a way that he illuminates for us the darkness of Dublin's religious apostasy so that we might see its ugliness as clearly as Jack Power sees the bloody disaster which has been wrought in Tom Kernan's mouth as the result of his fall down a pub stairway.

Before, however, examining the first theory of structure in "Grace," perhaps an understanding of the prevailing theme of the *Dubliners* as a whole would help us to appreciate the uniqueness of this penultimate story's contribution toward the development of that theme. Joyce said of the *Dubliners* that it was a moral history of his country in which he had provided a "nicely polished looking-glass" which would allow the Irish people an opportunity to have one good look at themselves (Ellman 230). The episodes of this literary confrontation "are arranged from childhood to maturity, broadening from private to public scope" (Ghiselin 317). By allowing them such a comprehensive look at themselves, he was "setting up the criteria by which Dublin must judge and be judged" (Ellman 344). In a letter dated July, 1904, and addressed to C. P. Curran, he wrote that he was writing a series of stories which "I call the series *Dubliners* to betray the soul of that hemiplegia or paralysis which many consider a city" (169). Aware of the fact that Joyce had originally planned that "Grace" should be the last and most important story of the series (Niemeyer 196), Homer O. Brown proposes that before Joyce's addition of "The Dead," *Dubliners* was "a picture of total paralysis, sterility, and frustration" (82).

While David E. Jones also see the development of this social, moral, and spiritual paralysis as a cyclical progression from childhood to maturity, he equates the cycles in the life of the Dubliners to the four seasons: childhood with spring, adolescence with summer, maturity with fall, and public-mature life with winter; moreover, he further unites these stories with Joyce's use of the odors of death and dying (108-17). Brewster Ghiselin argues for the spatial pattern of motion and arrest and the pattern of virtues and sins. He maintains that the movement which links these stories together is

... movement of the human soul, in desire of life, through various

conditions of Christian virtues and stages of deadly sin, toward or away from the font and altar and all the gifts of the two chief sacraments provided for its salvation, toward or away from God... Each story in *Dubliners* is an action defining amid difficulty in the environment a frustration or defeat of the soul..., and the sequence represents the whole course of moral deterioration ending in the death of the soul. (322)

In tracing this directional movement, Ghiselin sees an eastward trend in the first six stories of *Dubliners* which is symbolic of the Christian's hope in Christ's return to take the Church back to heaven with Him. This trend becomes less vague as the settings of the stories move to the outskirts of the city or beyond. The seventh story presents an impulse to escape paralysis from near the heart of the city by flying upward. The next four stories reverse the eastward tendency in movement to a westward one. Then, in the three public-life stories, movement is limited to the heart of the city, the exact center of arrest. Finally, in vision only, the direction of this series turns far westward into death (320).

Although Ghiselin's and Jones's theories of unity vary to some degree, both men seem to agree that Joyce utilizes an overall pattern of organization by which he depicts the process of Dublin's moral, cultural, and spiritual paralysis which is halted only by death. No scholar seems to totally disagree with this general consensus.

That Joyce was as careful with the form of "Grace" as he was with the unifying structure of *Dubliners* is an undeniable *fait accompli.* That he utilized learned mythopoeia which becomes profoundly complex is also undeniable. Northrop Frye points out, however, that through Joyce's mythopoeia his "complexities are designed to reveal and not to disguise the myth" (117). Even with the cautious scrutiny of a fellow Irishman,

Frank O'Conner recognized that Joyce has used more than one layer of mythical structuring in "Grace. " While O'Conner knew that Joyce had told his brother, Stanislaus, that this story was based on Dante's *Divine Comedy*, he is not too sure that there are not more classical influences hidden in its structure. O'Conner concedes that the Dantean structure is likely enough because it excitedJoyce to play the well-known literary game of basing his books on underlying myths and theories in order to delight his readers by providing them opportunities to discover nuggets of classical allusions in his stories. This was a game which had the incidental advantage of not only flattering the reader's self concept of personal erudition but also of planting the idea that the writer was a great literary scholar (310). The fact remains, O'Conner is suspicious that Tom Kernan's four friends may be types of the Four Evangelists, thus dispelling Joyce's claim that Dante's *Divine Comedy* provided the sole mythical framework for *Dubliners* (312). Despite his doubts, O'Conner is agreed that the first great statement in this literary fugue is a theme taken from the *Divine Comedy*.

It is quite fitting that the first mythopoetic recognition should be from Dante's *magnum opus* since the spiritual dimensions of man's fall are of such magnitude in the *Inferno* that Kernan's fall down the tavern stairway onto the filthy lavatory floor seems all the more mean and ludicrous in Joyce's symbolic treatment of the fall of his universal man. Joyce uses the story of Tom Kernan's condition as a stage upon which is played out the last little dying hope for the Dubliner's spiritual revitalization through an acceptance of truth concerning himself. Tom Kernan's dilemma in "Grace" is a mock-epic which is structured along the somber, majectic divisions of the *Divine Comedy*. Tom's lying curled up on a floor covered with excremental filth is the result of missing the mark as far as his personal and business lives are concerned. His

piteous condition is just as real as is that of Dante's fallen man; however, there is an embarrassing, risible element in Kernan's clownish, drunken composure. He is in the peaceful fetal position of an unborn baby; yet he is lying in the filth of an Irish inferno mingling his own blood with these vile excretions. As he is helped upstairs by the two gentlemen in the lavatory, his clothing and once resplendent silk hat are smeared with the smelly ooze of his fall.

The bar is the generalized purgatorial backdrop for presenting the men of Dublin who are "economically beset, culturally restricted by rigid contentions, liable to domestic discords, dependent on drink and masculine fellowship and a naive allegiance to an ecclesiasticism tainted with simony" (Beck 277 – 78). The men who stand in a circle looking down on the supine Tom are poor excuses for the colorful but horrible scenes in the circle of Dante's hell; however, they represent as broad a spectrum of graceless souls as Dante characterized in his *Inferno* because they are just as curious about his graceless figure as Dante is in seeing all he can when Virgil guides him through hell. Anonymity being a characteristic of Joyce's concept of gracelessness, Tom's insistence upon remaining anonymous as long as possible provides the element of mystery which is necessary in order to establish him as Joyce's mental and spiritual epitome of a Dubliner.

Tom Kernan's arrival home in such graceless condition is all the more remarkable because his wife is resigned to helping him recover, an indication that she has been called upon time and time again to assist him to rise from the mire of hell's filth. He is stripped of his dignity, his money, and his health; he also has lost a part of his faculty to express himself orally, making his state of gracelessness all the more ignominious. It is there in his bedroom where his friends come to help guide him through his state of gracelessness into paradise that Joyce presents

us with the fugue-like variations of the archetypes of the sins of Dublin. These four friends are, indeed, the blind trying to lead the blind Tom back into a state of grace.

The church in Gardiner Street is Joyce's mock paradise. It is there that sober Tom is brought by his friends to go through the motions of repentance in order to become socially acceptable in the eyes of God. For Tom, his friends, and obviously Father Purdon, the confession and the mass is merely the price the "businessman" pays in order to gain the "commodity" of prosperity. Father Purdon should be the spiritual guide who leads them into grace; sadly enough, his sins have so blinded him that he has only led them into a deeper state of paralysis. In miserable, wretched, and mocking tones, Joyce has established the first theme of his literary fugue: the sin of paralyzing materialism. Dante's *Divine Comedy* only amplifies the wretchedness of the Dubliner's hell.

The next mythic theme which Joyce holds up as a mirror for the *gens de Dublin* is one whose overtones perhaps are more tragic than they are ludicrous. The structural frame of the biblical story of Job allows Joyce to focus more sharply his attention on his Irish Job, Tom, who once has appeared to be quite prosperous, thus socially acceptable and to be in a state of grace by virtue of his silk hat and gaiters. Now, he has fallen into disrespectability. F. X. Newman points out that Tom Kernan's "present decay is several times contrasted with his vanished affluence, and Joyce keeps Tom's old prosperity before us by dressing him in battered silk hat and stained frock coat, the frowsy remnants of his nuptial splendor" (71).

These two stories are paralleled in this manner. Tom's fall down the pub stairs is the calamitous culmination of his fall from prosperity which is the "grace" that most pleases *Dubliners*. His fall is like that of Job's in that Job, a once respected man, also falls into calamity. There

are major differences, however, in the ramifications of their falls. Job was an example of a good man who sought to be faithful to his family and to God; Tom has been an improvident, calloused father and husband who has, on occasion, been violent until his sons matured enough to check his wrath. While Tom is brought home to an indifferent, nameless wife in the same way that Job is left comfortless by an indifferent, nameless wife, still Mrs. Kernan shows more tenderness to Tom than did Mrs. Job to Job. Job's sufferings are more physically acute then are those of Tom's. While Job's boils have made him a living corpse, Tom's spiritual boils have, to a certain degree, paralyzed him into the icey hell of indifference. And an icey hell is Dante's hell, not Father Abraham's.

The great disparity, however, between Tom and Job is that Job is financially restored to grace with God and Tom is only re-instated into "grace" at the Gardiner Street Church. Newman points out that perhaps Joyce's omission of the dialogue between Satan and God concerning Job's grace and prosperity in the Epilogue of the Book of Job is because Joyce, while at Belvedere College, had studied the story of Job from Joseph Reeves's *The History of the Holy Bible*. Reeves, drawing a moral from Job's restoration, concluded that Job's spiritual restoration (his return to grace) was more important than his restored riches were. He wrote that the Christian "considers only those as real evils which either sully or destroy the life of the soul, which is sanctifying grace, and sets his heart on no other riches than what are invisible and eternal" (76). The irony is that Joyce's parody of the restored-to-grace man is even more glaring because the unrepentant Tom desires not to please God but to rise on the wheel of Fortuna to what a Dubliner would consider to be the graceful state of prosperity.

While Joyce's brother, Stanislaus, called "Grace" a parody of the *Divine Comedy*, and while Newman thinks that it is more pertinently anal-

agous to the Book of Job, Newman agrees with Stanislaus Joyce that the technique employed by his brother in the story is parody, though the parallels between the stories resemble but never quite meet (77). Nevertheless, Joyce's brilliant use of the Job story helps the reader understand better the feeble, bumbling, but blasphemous efforts Tom makes in questioning the Catholic Church when we consider them in the light of Job's anguished questioning of God. It intensifies our understanding of the tragedy of darkness in the minds of Tom's four friends when we examine them in the light of Job's four friends, and the simoniacal sermon of Father Purdon becomes even more hideously heretical when it is compared to the voice of the Lord God that spoke to Job from the whirlwind. Indeed, Joyce's use of parody in this modern retelling of Job's story has by its deliberate mimicry produced a *reductio ad absurdum* of the Book of Job. Yet, at the same time, he has portrayed a man who, in spite of his feeble questionings and his pompously ignorant friends, is mentally and spiritually alive enough to make one last gasping effort to gain some semblance of truth. The Job story allows Joyce to point–counterpoint some tender notes of compassion along with the bitter notes of parody in the development of this second theme.

The third mythic structure which the author of "Grace" utilizes as a very important part of the story is the parable of the unjust steward which is found in Luke 16: 1–9. Through this structure, Robert Sumner Jackson sees Tom as the unjust steward who has mismanaged his worldly goods because of his drinking (722). His business practices have deteriorated as he has squandered his money on the pleasure of drink. Finally, his fall to the bottom of a lavatory floor brings about his retreat to the home whose goods he has mishandled. Regardless of his imprudence, his lack of respectability, and his treatment of his wife, family, and friends, they stand by him in the same way the unjust steward's

master and even his debtors stood by him.

Joyce's parody of this parable reaches the apex of its intensity when he has Father Purdon to reverse the meaning of the Lord's commendation of the unjust steward for implementing the business practices of reducing uncollectible debts so that something might be salvaged from nothing. The unjust steward's motive for so doing was selfish: he wanted a place to go when he was turned out of his master's house. He was only providing a place for himself in the homes of his grateful ex-debtors. Jesus commended him not for being self-provident and unscrupulous but rather for using good business practices in the management of his master's money. The verses of this parable which Father Purdon and even Christian thinkers have found to be so difficult to interpret are these:

> And the lord [the rich man] commended the unjust steward, forasmuch as he had done wisely: For the children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light. And I [Jesus] say unto you [His disciples]: make unto you friends of the mammon [*mammonos*, which means "wealth personified"] of iniquity; that when ye shall fail [*ekleipo*, which means "to cease" or "to die"], they [these material riches which have been invested in good works] will receive you into everlasting dwellings.[1]

Verse 2 of this same chapter confirms the truth which Jesus was teaching when He said, "If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches ?" (Luke 16: 11) So it seems that although Jesus was speaking of utilizing wise business practices for the good of the Kingdom of God's sake, He was not speaking paradoxically as Jackson claims (721). The using of

riches for the glory of God is a spiritually acceptable way of doing the good works that Christians are charged to do

> Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not high-minded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy; That they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to communicate; Laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life. (I Timothy 6: 17—19)

The antithesis of this practice is Joyce's Father Purdon who incorrectly interpreted Jesus's teaching so that it aligned with his simonaical concepts, thereby exchanging "religious approval of sharp business practices for formal adherence to religious doctrine" (Kaye 24).

As Jackson points out, St. Luke's account of the unjust steward does not have him repenting; yet he is commended for mending his business practices so that his lord gains something whereas he might not have gained anything. Neither does Tom nor his friends truly repent of their mismanagement. Instead of repentance, there is a parody of the mass in Tom's bedroom, the sacrament being whiskey rather than wine (723—24). He and each of his friends are examples of some type of mismanagement. Instead of Father Purdon's preaching a sermon of repentance whereby these men might turn from their destructive practices, he entones the simonaical practices of the Church as doctrine (although he is morally unqualified to do so, he speaks this false teaching *ex cathedra*): these erroneous doctrines lock the doors of hell on Tom and his friends. This third influence of classical structure resounds with grace notes of everlasting proportions !

At the close of Father Purdon's sermon, when he makes the moral

appeal, he admonishes each of his listeners to look into his spiritual account book and frankly examine it. Should any man find anything amiss, he should be a man and admit it by saying to himself, "With God's *grace*, I will rectify this and this, I will set right my accounts" (Joyce 174). This is the last step of a simonaical progression that condemns these Dubliners to the total paralysis of spiritual darkness. The progression is delineated by the three uses of the word *grace*. The first time Joyce uses this word, he has Tom to say that "by *grace* a silk hat and gaiters were all a man need to pass muster" (Joyce 154). He associates a silk hat and gaiters with social respectability. While no scholar has associated these three uses of the word *grace* to the three graces of Greek mythology, it is interesting to note how well a description of these three match Joyce's use of them. The first grace Aglaia's name means "splendid" and "bright." Joyce twists his ironic knife in the wound of truth when he made Tom's "splendid" headgear the grace that opened doors of social respectability. This makes his fall correspond so well with his filth-smeared hat and his rehabilitated hat to symbolize his restoration to a state of grace in the Church.

The second time that the word *grace* is used is in reference to Fogarty's grace of manners for commercial purposes. In his store he bore himself with a "certain grace" in order to "ingratiate himself" with his neighborhood customers (Joyce 166). The second grace's name, Euphrosyne, means "of good or cheerful mind." Fogarty utilizes his "grace" to sell groceries; what a travesty of the meaning of the word, but how appropriately Fogarty symbolizes the commercialization of the beauty of grace.

The third use of the word *grace* occurs when Father Purdon uses it in the closing words of his appeal. This is "by God's grace" (Joyce 174) corresponds to the Greek Thalia whose name means "to flourish or to

bloom." Instead of blooming as the children of light, they have become confirmed into making light become darkness in the same way that M'Coy had corrected Fogarty's *Lux in tenebris* [objective case, therefore receiving action] to *tenebrae* [nominative case, therefore originating action]. Now they are no longer innocent, ignorant victims of darkness; they are flourishing, blooming generators and perpetrators of darkness and death.[2]

As Joyce amalgamates the variations of theme of his literary fugue into a final bold statement, he seats these children of darkness (Tom has avowed that he will not carry the candle in the ceremony of repentance) in the church in the form of the quincunx which represents the five wounds of Christ; on the other hand, its wheel-shape reminds us of the goddess Fortuna's wheel which plunges the "Tom Kernans" down while raising the "Jack Powers" on their arc of ascendency. It seems that Joyce carefully seated his five men to form the pentangle for one last satiric comment on the spiritual condition of the men of Dublin. Because they had made a mockery of the wounds of Christ, they had condemned themselves to the complete paralysis of death. Surely Joyce was aware of these verses in the New Testament Book of Hebrews:

> For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to open shame. (Hebrews 6: 4-6)

These men are all modern Simon Maguses who follow Satan, the prince of simony. They have sought to buy social, commercial, and spir-

itual respectability with gold in the same way that Simon Magus tried to buy the power of the Holy Spirit from Peter and John as it is related by St. Luke in Acts 8: 9－24. Instead of being rebuked for their sins, they sit like corpses with their hats in their hands. Joyce has developed these variations of theme of their sad plight in Dantean, biblical, and Greek classical tones. He, with his brilliant use of mythopoeia, has allowed us to pull together all the fragments of the lives of his Dubliners so that they not only may see themselves as they are but that we may also see ourselves in them and thereby mourn our own sad condition. The last mournful notes of Joyce's fugue die into silence. The cold winds of death and decay whisper down the aisles of the Church in Gardiner Street. Only in the stillness of the heart can one hear the exiled poet weeping in anger for his native land, his Ireland.

Notes

1. I have used the Hebrew and Greek lexicons in James Strong's *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance* (Nashville: Crusade Bible Publishers, Inc., n. d.)

2. With regard to the three uses of the word grace, I have generally referred to C. H. Peake's *James Joyce : The Citizen and the Artist* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977), pp. 36 — 45. For my own research in connecting the names of the three graces to the meaning of Joyce's use of the word *grace*, I have used only *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, ed. William Morris (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981).

3. I am indebted to Mrs. Janet B. Womack of Baiko High School for her technical assistance in the production of the manuscript of this essay.

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