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THE GRAMMAR OF DUPLICITY IN JAMES JOYCE'S "THE BOARDING HOUSE"

Summary

Compared with many of the stories in Dubliners, "The Boarding House" has received relatively little attention. This is due perhaps to its apparent "simplicity" when compared with the other stories in the volume. It is, on the surface, an old story, the folktale-like tricking of the naive male by a scheming mother and daughter. It is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate just how sophisticated the narrative strategy really is, how the "duping" of Bob Doran is best read against/within a series of other duplications, or doublings, or counterparts, and through such a reading to offer an explication of the sexual/textual politics of "The Boarding House." In order to do this I move from a broad consideration of the story in the context of the volume as a whole to a progressively more particular concern with narrative and language, ending with the grammatical interrogation of one word.

***Key words**: James Joice, Dubliners, Boarding house, duplicity and grammar.*

It is now commonplace to acknowledge the unity of Joyce's volume, the careful ordering of his stories and their intertextual relations, and I want to suggest that in the context of a more circumscribed unity "The Boarding House" is best read alongside (between) a pair of other stories. Although "Two Gallants" was thirteenth in order of composition,

Joyce placed it just before "The Boarding House" (fifth in order of composition) for publication. "Counterparts," the other story that is useful as a contextual ground, was written almost simultaneously with "The Boarding House," in the first few weeks of July 1905. All three stories share, as do all the stories, a similar narrative strain of thwarted desire, of inverted, some might say perverted, romantic quest. More particularly, they narrativize the relations between men and women, of domesticity and "romance," as does "A Little Cloud," the last written of the fourteen stories (only "The Dead" remained to be written) but placed strategically after "The Boarding House" in the final order.

"Counterparts," the story Joyce turned to after "The Boarding House" describes a series of relationships constituted (and this is one of the meanings of the title) by corresponding repressive forces. Among these is a marriage in which Ada Farrington "bullied her husband when he was sober and was bullied by him when he was drunk" (Dubliners, 97). But this is of course not the only bullying that takes place in a narrative structured upon the reproduction of violence, from Farrington's repressed desire to crush his overseer Mr. Alleyne's skull, through the displaced (but it turns out not cathartic) arm-wrestling match, to the climactic scene in which Farrington gives that same defeated arm "free use" in the beating of his child. In a letter to his brother, Joyce attempts to excuse Farrington's behaviour, suggesting that in this world of brutalities we should not forget the more mediated brutality of Farrington's alienated being, and that some consideration should be given to <u>his</u> "desire for happiness." It has been well noted that he is referred to throughout the text as the "man" and achieves only a temporary personality in the camaraderie of the pub. It is an index of the life-denying aspects of his existence that Farrington can only become a human being when in the process of getting drunk. His job is that paradigm of alienated labour, that alliterative hell ("let the said Bodley be…" he tries to write over and over again) in which the copier reproduces signifiers which for him have no meaningful signification. Farrington's "desire for happiness" (to use Joyce's phrase) finds its satisfaction not in his wife and home-life, but rather the gratification which rests on the "small cylinder of coins"

he obtains for pawning his watch. When we leave him "a very-sullen faced man" near the end of the story he is humiliated and defeated with only two pence in his pocket.

"Two Gallants," the story that was thirteenth in the order of composition but which Joyce placed sixth, strategically before "The Boarding House" is another tale of the ironic inversion/perversion of romantic quest. This story contains perhaps the most famous coin in the whole volume, but there is much more "circulating" in "Two Gallants" than the mere monetary system. This story, composed much later in the sequence, employs a prose that is far from the "scrupulous meanness" that Joyce told his publisher he had utilized in representing his native city. The highly wrought prose of the first paragraph, with its repetitive, almost static quality, evokes the listless mood and directionless life that Corley and, especially, Lenehan lead. And the "mild warm air" that "circulates" in the summer streets prefigures Lenehan's perambulations throughout the narrative journey. There is a very similar descriptive paragraph later in the story in which Ireland herself is symbolically depicted (in the form of a harp) as the servant of "strangers." Not only is she "weary," but she is also in a state of undress in front of the club that houses the Anglo-Irish Ascendency. In keeping with the intricate structure of this story, the fact that her master's hands play her "heedlessly" is a figurative correspondence with Corley's "heedless" exploitation of the young rural Irish servant girl. Apart from this "business" that forms the center of the story, there is also the economy of desire that is the motor which drives Lenehan's circular odyssey, his desire for satisfaction by vicariously playing out his friend's adventure in a life which is like Mr. Duffy's in "A Painful Case," an "adventureless tale." Lenehan's "desire for happiness" is, predictably, premised on the economic possibility of coming across "some good simple-minded girl with a little of the ready" (Dubliners, 58) and such a wish parallels Corley's singular economic arrangement of obtaining payment from the servant girl. With regard to the fulfillment of desire, it is significant that we read that "Lenehan suffered all the pangs and thrills of his friend's situation" (59), because although there is firm closure to the story, a climactic moment as it were,

Corley makes his friend wait and delays his satisfaction. When Corley relaxes his hand to reveal the "small gold coin," (60) he not only uncovers a signifier for all the economies that have circulated in the story, but helps open up another narrative of triangular desire which directly follows it.

"Mrs. Mooney was a butcher's daughter," reads the first sentence of "A Boarding House." She is "a determined woman," (61) and before we are too far into the narrative we learn that her "business" is somewhat more subtle than the two neer-do-wells of the previous story. Her daughter Polly would never be treated like the "slavey" who pays for (as Corley puts it) a "bit of class." In this trio of domestic tales the story of Mrs. Mooney, Polly and Bob Doran is like "Counterparts" one of marriage (indeed two marriages) and the effects that alcohol has on the economics and affections of those marriages. Like "Two Gallants," "The Boarding House" is a narrative about "love" and commerce. The complicity of the two men in the duping of a servant girl in the former story finds its correspondence in the "persistent silence" and "complicity" (even if not "open") of the two women and their trapping of Bob Doran in "The Boarding House." The two women are, in their double dealing, "counterparts" of the two men, as has often been noted. The "business" conducted by the two gallants (vicariously by one of them), the payment for services rendered, becomes a less tangible token in "The Boarding House" but a much more longstanding one. We will hear more of a drunken Bob Doran and Polly Mooney in Joyce's *Ulysses.*

The micro-narrative that opens "The Boarding House," the synoptic portrayal of a marriage, reveals in miniature most if not all of the features of the volume's portrayal of domestic arrangements. In this mini portrait, contained in a paragraph or so, we have all the ingredients of marital dysfunction: economic instability, excessive drinking, and domestic violence. "One night he went for his wife with a cleaver and she had to sleep in a neighbour's house" (61). That "one night" is the first of several temporal markers in this narrative of subtle time shifts, to which I want to return shortly. Unable to get a divorce, Mrs. Mooney gets the next best thing, a separation sanctioned by the church. (Although per-

missible in England and Wales under an act passed in 1867, because of the pressures of the Catholic Church divorce was not an option for Mrs. Mooney.) Her husband's business "ruined," her marriage broken down, Mrs. Mooney sets out to *repair* her life as best she can. Selling up shop, she opens a boarding house (referred to as a "boardelhouse'" in *Finnegans Wake*), governing her affairs shrewdly and giving her daughter Polly "the run of the young men" (63). But since, we read, "none of them meant *business*" (63, italics added), Mrs. Mooney bides her time waiting for a viable commercial proposition to present itself.

The exchange value put upon her daughter's arrangement with Mr. Doran is a much more complex one than that worked out by Corley and Lenehan in "Two Gallants." "Some mothers would be content to patch up such an affair for a sum of money; she had known cases of it. But she would not do so. For her only one reparation could make up for the loss of her daughter's honour: marriage" (65). The use of the colon as a marker here is a reflection of the firmness, not to say inevitability, of the determined outcome of the affair. In this arena of sexual politics, Mrs. Mooney, by ordering, controlling, "governing" the mechanisms of desire ("she knew when to be stern and when to let things pass," 61) will ensure that Polly (unlike one of Corley's cast offs) will not end up "on the turf." Within the broad social formation that is Dublin, and within the more circumscribed world of her house, Mrs. Mooney negotiates her empowerment by authorizing a series of performances, which seems only fitting for an establishment that relies on a steady clientele of music-hall *artistes*. Indeed, this tale which is almost entirely made up of indirect discourse (only the final crucial words are actually rendered in direct dialogue), could be said to consist for the most part of a series of "rehearsals." The protagonists only come on stage for the denouement, for that one moment in the present that has arisen out of multiple embedded micro-narratives concerning the past and which speaks to the future.

The "now" of the story, the base time in a series of chronological oscillations, is "a bright Sunday morning of early summer" (63) and the crucial decision which will seal Mr. Doran's fate (and Polly's) takes place

between seventeen minutes past eleven and just before twelve noon when Mrs. Mooney plans to attend mass at Marlborough Street church. This short period (about three quarters of an hour) which will initiate the kind of unsatisfactory marriage that we encounter in the other stories (this is implied by Bob Doran's reservations but we have the evidence in *Ulysses*) is composed for the most part of two blocks of indirect discourse filtered through the consciousnesses of Mrs. Mooney and Mr. Doran respectively. Formally, such a narratological decision seems very apposite for a story in which nothing takes place directly, in a frank and open way. Even the scene of seduction is evasively referred to as "it," the act that dare not speak its name: "He could not make up his mind whether to like her or despise her for what she had done. Of course he had done it too [...] It was not altogether his fault that it had happened." (66, 67, Italics added)

Mrs. Mooney's performance/rehearsal is marked by a series of rationalizations couched in the terms of the "outraged mother." She would have the "weight of social opinion" behind her: "he had simply taken advantage of Polly's youth and inexperience;" the man "can go his ways as if nothing had happened, having had his moment of pleasure, but the girl has to bear the brunt," and so on (64). If the clichéd form of Mrs. Mooney's sentiments were not enough to defuse any serious reception of her supposed maternal instincts, we have also the fact that Polly's innocence is a "wise" one and Mrs. Mooney's silence is markedly of the "persistent" kind. There are the authentic and expected reactions of a concerned mother (those forces of social opinion) and Mrs. Mooney's playing out, or simulation, of them.

It is of some significance that she and Doran should arrive at the same term (or one might say they come commercially to the same "terms") in this business independently, even if their emphases and motivations differ. For Mrs. Mooney "reparation" signifies an investment, not so much a simple mode of exchange (as in "Two Gallants" for example) but rather a long-term compensation—since after all what has been taken from Polly (her virginity, supposedly) cannot in any sense be repaired or restored. It is as well, one has to conjecture, a form of re-compensation or

reparation for her own disastrous marriage. Mr. Doran's religious conscience dictates that he arrives at the same term: "he was almost thankful at being afforded a loophole of reparation" (65) he reminds himself after his confession of the night before. He is "a serious young man, not rakish or loud-voiced like the others [...] and she [Mrs. Mooney] knew he had a good screw [salary] for one thing and she suspected he had a bit of stuff put by" (65). How different from her own "shabby stooped little drunkard" (61) of a husband who had ruined her previous business.

For Bob Doran it is a double, or over-determined, social and religious "reparation" that is called for, underscoring the volume's suggestion of an environmental determinism at work in Joyce's Dublin. His reflections on the matter at hand—beginning with the paragraph "Mr. Doran was very anxious indeed this Sunday morning" (65)—ponder his religious duty and his position of thirteen years in a Catholic wine merchant's office. While he is rehearsing the possible consequences of his action, he thinks: "Dublin is such a small city: everyone knows everyone else's business" (66). Towards the end of the narrative, when Bob is summoned to meet his fate, he longs "to ascend through the roof and fly away to another country" but "a force pushed him downstairs step by step" (67-68). That "force" is not only "the weight of social opinion" that Mrs. Mooney had impersonated earlier but which for the timid Doran is all too authentic, but also the weight of Polly's brother Jack who Doran meets on the stairs and whose "thick short arms" reinforce those social obligations.

This potential violence is echoed by Mrs. Mooney's "intervention." Her act of coming between the two "lovers" as intermediary (she is called "The Madam" by the young men boarders) is imaged perfectly by Joyce in one of the best-known sentences in *Dubliners*: "She dealt with moral problems as a cleaver deals with meat: and in this case she had made up her mind" (63). The simile serves to encapsulate very "keenly" both Mrs. Mooney's hereditary skills (she is after all "a butcher's daughter") and the "edge" she has over Bob Doran's bluntly conventional morality. It is also appropriate that the cleaver which "separated" Mrs. Mooney from her husband (that night "he went for his wife with a cleaver") should, at

least figuratively, bring Polly and Bob Doran together as man and wife: divorce and marriage come together at one "fatal" stroke.

It might be too much to suggest that some sentences which Joyce added to the original manuscript version before publication, sentences which include one of the many temporal markers in a very subtle sequence of narrative time shifts, extend this notion of how "cleavage" contributes to Bob Doran's downfall. When Polly visits his room on this particular Sunday morning (the "now" of the narrative) and he feels "against his shirt the agitation of her bosom" (66) he is reminded of his nights of "delirium." The section of prose Joyce decided to add seems hardly necessary following as it does the most pathetically understated sentence in the whole sad tale: "It was not altogether his fault that it had happened" (67). In the original manuscript, the paragraph continued from the second sentence ending "the first casual caresses her dress, her breath, her arms [Joyce changed "arms" to "fingers" in the published version] had given him" with the beginning of the next paragraph in the published version: "On nights when he came in very late…" etc. He added the following before publication:

> Then late one night as he was undressing for bed she had tapped at his door, timidly. She wanted to relight her candle at his for hers had been blown out by a gust. It was her bath night. She wore a loose open combing-jacket of printed flannel. Her white instep shone in the opening of her furry slippers and the blood glowed warmly behind her perfumed skin. From her hands and wrists too as she lit and steadied her candle a faint perfume arose" (67).

This temporal marker ("Then late one night") is one of many embedded within Bob Doran's reflections as he sits awaiting his summons, and the many temporal shifts in the story as a whole are indicative of the young Joyce's brilliant manipulation of the short story form in which the past, present, and potential futures of lives are transfixed in a temporal moment of crisis.

Crucial as the above narrative moment is, it is only one among the multiple signifiers of temporal shifts in this subtle narrative. These can

be markers of duration ("While he was sitting helplessly" (66); "While he was sitting with her on the side of the bed" (67) are examples. Or the temporal markers can be of indefinite historical moments: for example, "On Sunday nights there would be a reunion in Mrs. Mooney's front drawing room" (62); "As a young man he had sown his wild oats(66); "They used to go upstairs together on tiptoe" (67). These are a few of many examples. Crucially, there are those markers which signify moments of definitive significance: "One night he went for his wife with a cleaver" (61) which in a very real sense opens Polly's, Mrs. Mooney's and Bob Doran's story, and "Then she remembered what she had been waiting for" (69) which offers it closure. Before this remembrance of Polly's she had fallen into a reverie, had, as it were, temporarily suspended her performance, but her mother calls her back on stage for the final (speech) act. Originally the story ended with three little words, words which Joyce decided to omit from the final version, words that might be the most redundant Joyce ever wrote. After the final sentence in the published version ("Then she remembered what she had been waiting for.") the manuscript has as its final sentence: "This was it." What a wise choice to excise such superfluity, the only textual/interpretive use being perhaps the linking of that "it" with the earlier "it" which Bob and Polly had done together, collapsing or equating that act with its ultimate (contrived?) consequence: the offer of marriage.

This is a narrative that is over-determined by duplicity, by paradox in the broadest sense of the term; that is to say that which is contrary to, or in expectation of, received opinion. This is compacted, figured, oxymoronically for us in Polly's "wise innocence" and her "perverse Madonna," but it is one of those temporal markers in the grammar of the narrative which forms a sort of fulcrum for the story's duplicity. One sentence, one temporal adverbial clause, one word, on which the story's dubious morality pivots: it is a moment when its narrative course could have taken a different turn. "Things went on so for a long time [that is Polly's flirtations with the young boarders] and Mrs. Mooney began to think of sending Polly back to typewriting <u>when</u> she noticed that something was going on between Polly and one of the young men" (63, Italics

added.). Here then, at this temporal junction, the kind of conventional morality we expect from a mother becomes derailed, or at least shunted in another direction. That "when" (which might remind us those other "whens" when Mr. Mooney knew "when to be stern and when to let things pass") could be read as a consequential and conventionally moral "because" instead of the opportunistic "until" that it is. That is to say, the ambiguity of that "when" could be construed as a move on Mrs. Mooney's part to protect her daughter's reputation by sending her away rather than the reverse, and a similar grammatical ambiguity gives a poignant edge to Bob Doran's remark, when at one point in the story he wonders about the future with a younger woman whose speech betrays her as common: "sometimes she said 'I seen' and 'If I had've known'. But [Bob reflects] what would grammar matter if he really loved her?" (66).

In the context of the volume as a whole, or even of the few stories I have highlighted here and which Joyce placed strategically together, we should not be too harsh on Mrs. Mooney and her daughter. The temptation might be to see them too simplistically (as some readers have) as ruthless predators to Bob Doran's sacrificial lamb. We would do well to remember that that opportunistic "when" referred to above is more than a linguistic or grammatical marker. It is, as well, an ideological signifier for a society in which women are inscribed as disempowered virgin-whores and who, in this case especially, must act (and act swiftly) on the belief that any kind of marriage is better than no marriage at all.

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