
An Encounter: A Child's exploration of the
outside world.

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In Dubliners, Joyce saw Dublin as a person, with four stages of life: childhood, adolescence, maturity and public life¹. The order of the stories is as follows: The Sisters, An Encounter and another story [Araby] are the stories of [his] childhood. The Boarding House, After the Race and Eveline which are stories of adolescence; and The Clay, Counterparts and A Painful Case which are the stories of mature life; Ivy Day in the Committee Room, A Mother and the last story of the book [Grace] which are stories of public life in Dublin². Joyce managed in Dubliners to survey the human landscape from infancy to senility, from birth to death from the young men knocking at the door to old men struggling to keep it shut.

An Encounter carries Joyce's ideas, mainly expressed through symbols about school boys struggling beneath several pressures, the pressure of their homes, the pressure of school,

the pressure of their own sentiments and fears, and above all their physical growth from childhood to manhood.

The story is realistic in a certain sense; the plot has a simple outline, but exploited with an impressionism which seized upon every detail, and these details stream through the mind of one character. It is told in the first person which determines the choice, organization and emphasis of the incidents, being provided by the recollected impressions of the narrator, who is a young boy moving from boyhood to adolescence. Joyce shows the physical and mental wanderings of that boy in Dublin for the space of twenty-four hours. The boy's thoughts flicker through his mind like fishes, thoughts suggested by whatever business he is about, by things that catch his eyes in the streets, by smells that assail his nostrils, and all the time, coming to consciousness with these sense impressions.

An Encounter delineates the life of young boys at school and the influence of each one on the other. Three of these boys are close and play as a group. The hero is timid-natured, Leo Dillon is fat and clumsy, but Joe Dillon, the wildest of the three has a collection of Wild West stories and arranges Indian battles in which he is always victorious. To the hero, these adventures, related in the literature of the Wild West were remote from his nature but, at least, they opened doors of escape³. He liked

American detective stories better, but these, too, were prohibited in school.

One day, Leo Dillon, the "idler" as the hero called, was caught and rebuked severely by Father Butler for reading such "rubbish and wretched stuff"⁴ in class, after which the glory of the Wild West paled, but soon

When the restraining influence of the school was at a distance [the hero] began to hunger again for wild sensations, for the escape which these chronicles of disorder alone seemed to offer [him]. The mimic warfare of the evening became at last as wearisome to [him] as the routine of school in the morning because [he] wanted real adventures to happen to [himself]. But real adventures, [he] reflected do not happen to people who remain at home; they must be sought abroad⁵.

With Leo and a boy named Mahony, the hero planned a day's escape from school. As he sat waiting for his friends, the hero watched the docile horses pulling a tram load of business people up the hill, the gay branches of the tall trees; and the sunlight slanted through them on to the water⁶. He was excited and very happy. Leo failed to go, so the expedition was undertaken by the hero and Mahony. Together they walked along the noisy streets flanked by high stone walls watching the working of cranes and engines. Mahony, *playing the Indian* chased a crowd of ragged girls, brandishing his unloaded

catapult, an act which sent two ragged boys, out of chivalry, to throw stones at them. Mahony proposed to charge them, but the hero objected because the boys were too small ⁷.

When they got to the Canal Bank and to the quays, they marveled at the spectacle of Dublin's Commerce. The barges making signals of smoke, fully seized the hero's eyes and imagination and gradually "school and home seemed to recede from [them] and their influences upon [them] seemed to wane" ⁸. They crossed the river in a ferryboat and at landing, they stopped to watch a Norwegian vessel being discharged. Curiosity incited the hero to walk down the stern to decipher the legend upon it. He also examined the foreign sailors to see if they had green eyes because he had a strange notion that sailor's eyes were blue and grey and even black ⁹.

The roamed around the slum area of Ringsend, buying food from the shops there, accepting its squalor and adapting themselves to the environment as though their games in the stable and the garden of their fancied Wild West had oriented them to the dirt and misery of the place. With fatigue and lateness of the hour, they abandoned their original project of visiting the Pigeon House, symbolic to many commentators, of Irish frustration and sacrilege ¹⁰. Alone in a wide field, they lay down silently and lazily watching the sun going behind some clouds, leaving them to their "jaded thoughts and the crumbs of

their provisions”¹¹. The final strange and alarming experience occurred when an old man, shabbily dressed, walked towards them “with one hand upon his hip and in the other hand he held a stick with which he tapped the turf lightly as if he was looking for some thing in the grass”¹². The old man sat beside the two boys and easily talked about the weather, school, school-boys, books, poetry, sweethearts and how he would give anything to be young again¹³.

On the subject of literature, the hero pretended that he had read every book the old man mentioned which won him the approval of the latter: “Ah, I can see you are a bookworm like myself. Now, he is different; he goes in for games”¹⁴. The hero was anxious to distinguish himself from Mahony and was anxious that his superiority should be recognized and was agitated lest the old man would think that he was as stupid as Mahony¹⁵.

On the subject of sweethearts, the old man, lingered, spoke mysteriously, repeated phrases over and over again with a monotonous voice. His attitude was odd, and when the two boys did not respond, he stood up slowly, walked to the end of the field with Mahony watching him and exclaiming “look what he’s doing ! . . . He’s a queer old josser !”¹⁶.

Mahony chased a cat across the field, leaving the hero alone with the old man who had back. The old man called

Mahony a "rough boy" and spoke on the subject of chastising unruly boys by sound whipping¹⁷. Looking involuntarily at the old man, the hero met "the gaze of a pair of bottle green eyes"¹⁸ looking at him under a twitching forehead. The weir old man continued his monologue forgetting his liberalism about boys having sweethearts, describing his great pleasure at whipping boys who had girls for sweethearts, pleading affectionately with the hero to understand him. Agitated and with his heart beating fast, the hero stood up abruptly, bade the man good day, walked to the top of the slope calling with an accent of forces bravery "Murphy" - - a false name on which the two boys had agreed -- before Mahony answered and came running towards him as if to aid him. The hero was both ashamed of his worthless stratagem and penitent, "for in his heart [he] had always despised Mahony a little"¹⁹.

Joyce wrote: "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"²⁰. In fact, part of Joyce's triumph is the intensely living quality which he give to Dublin. It is like an element in which the characters live. It spreads and flows through them as they walk along its streets and are aware of its impinging power on their movements and consciousness²¹.

Hence, the central theme in An Encounter is the spiritual paralysis in the society. The most frequent form of paralysis is captivity, both imposed by the deadening environment and produced by the character's own weakness. In other words, the main theme is the struggle of the young boy to escape the constricting circumstances of existence in Dublin, the centre of paralysis. It is a symbolic paralysis imposed by the nets of external pressure, and the hero's deficiency of impulse and power. To the hero, real life meant rigid school rules, home restrictions and the squalid, dirty, odorous environment of Dublin. He felt the creeping paralysis spreading all over him, engulfing his soul and impelling him to seek dream-escapes. A keen desire, a spirit of unruliness and an overwhelming longing for an escape from routine environment into adventurous activity seized the boy. But adventure and escape for him can never be more than dreams, not merely because of the squalid environment but because of the weakness developed in the soul ²². In fact, there is much emphasis on the hero's timidity and his occasional glimpses of his own feebleness: "We banded ourselves together, some boldly, some in jest and some almost in fear: and of the number of these latter, the reluctant Indians who were afraid to seem studious or looking in robustness, I was one ²³. He is different from the other boys by culture,

constitution and temperament, a fact which causes a conflict between his nature and his desire to conform.

The plight of the two young adventurers signifies an immersion in the world of facts. A new world opened to the hero, a world of green trees, granite stones of bridges, horses pulling tramload of business people, ferryboats and barges. There were no hindrances and no obstacles to present themselves against the hero's temporary physical and spiritual release until the shocking encounter with the pervert. The joy and the relief of the few hours of the adventure were cut short and the hero's dreams were deflated by the appearance of the "old jossor", the "pervert" who is a sinister representative of the adult world²⁴. The whole experience of escape from school justifies itself in the confrontation with menacing reality as personified in the old pervert. Meeting the old man turns out, in fact, to be inevitable and necessary climax to the hero's adventure. Whatever symbolic content or implication may be detected in the figure of the old man, the unquestionable fact remains that "he jolts the protagonist into an awareness of his futile pretensions and his need for the comfort and aid of his friend;"²⁵ it also proves his fitness in setting forth without adult assistance or supervision and in learning to adjust to the demands of actuality²⁶. The last sentence of An Encounter sums

up the young boy's feelings of frustration, disillusionment, self-knowledge, shame, fear, guilt and penitence.

Psychoanalysts agree that children vent their suppressed desires and fears in their games. In An Encounter, the Indian battles, the Wild West, the detective stories and above all the two boy's exciting adventure, represent outlets and open avenues of escape from the formalities and limitations of school and family life.

Joyce's religious ideas, both positive and negative, are expressed in this story. He revolted against strict, hard and fear-causing religious authority represented by Father Butler, who seemed to be living even in the boy's subconscious, because they expected to find him everywhere they went to²⁷. Father Butler believed that National school boys were far inferior in morals and manners to Religious school boys. His rebuke of Leo Dillon reflected that "I'm surprised at boys like you, educated, reading such stuff. I could understand it if you were . . . National school boys"²⁸. National school boys were, for example, whipped for wrongdoing. The religious conflict between the Catholic and Protestant churches also appears, when children chasing Mahonyu, call him a "a Swaddler" because he is a little dark, thinking he is a Protestant²⁹. Such an incident reflects the hatred against Protestants which is planted even in young children. Another instance which enfolds large significance is

the fact that it seemed incredulous to the hero that his friend, Joe Dillon - - who looked like a savage Indian - - and introduced the Wild West stories to the boys and even played too fiercely for them, had a vocation for priesthood, because the hero expected a priest to have a very peaceful and nature, totally different from that of Joe's.

In the meantime, Joyce's great respect and reverence for the peaceful side of religion is featured by Mrs. Dillon's daily attendance to eight o'clock Mass ³⁰. Her going to church exhibits faith and devotion for the Catholic Church.

The social theme in An Encounter is quite apparent and strong. The hero states frankly that there are differences of culture and constitution among the boys but they are waived in games ³¹. He is conscious of difference from the other boys and occasionally shamed by his alternating contempt for and dependence on them ³². Mahony, for example, is a simple dark-complexioned boy, untroubled by the routine of life because for him the routine safety-valves, using slang, playing at Indians, chasing animals and other children, riding in a train are sufficient. The hero, on the other hand, though mentally and culturally superior to the other boys, is fixed by his fears-fear of being though studious and fear of being though stupid, fear of mimic adventure and fear of real adventure, fear above all of loss of approval through not behaving in the was expected of

him³³. Social distinction is also displayed clearly among children because the poor are usually sent to National schools, whereas the richer are sent to Private ones.

Sensuality is a dominant feature in An Encounter and sex is discussed freely and boldly. To normal young boys, sex is mysterious, confusing and often unexplainable. A new experience opens to the two young boys, a new chapter in sex life. They are secretly unwilling to remain children and beginning to respond to the outside world, as they move closer to that moment when boyhood changes into adolescence. A cat in An Encounter is a symbol of sex. So a boy chasing a cat, like Mahony does, is a boy growing physically as well as sexually. He chases a cat like he chases little sweethearts. Mahony bragged that he had "three totties"³⁴ when he was asked by the pervert if he any sweethearts.

It was meeting the old man which posed real danger and evoked the sinister adult world into which the hero was about to enter. Apart from his physical ugliness, "the great gaps in his mouth between his yellow teeth"³⁵, the moral deformation of the old man betrays itself in the weird monotone, hypnotic style of his utterances, his slow walk and tapping the grass with his stick as if in search for youth and probably even for the queer kind of sex³⁶ The pervert disliked Mahony's childishness and violence but moved closer to the hero because he found him

more mature and perhaps easier to trap, an act which frightened the boy and congealed his spirit. There is an obvious sexual conflict within the queer old man because he contradicts himself in saying that he enjoys looking at boys with their sweethearts and then that boys who have girls for sweethearts ought to be whipped³⁷.

Even Mrs. Dillon who features warmth and peaceful family life - - to Joyce it is always the mother and not the father who represents love and care - -³⁸ implies sex, too. Her peaceful odour which was prevalent in the hall of the house raised in the boy a desire for women³⁹.

In An Encounter there is a distinct emphasis on colours. Joyce seems quite fond of the green colour in all its shades. Green symbolizes youth and the story being about young boys, Joyce persists on it. Green is not only used to describe fields, new branches, new branches, suits; it also distinguishes races. The young hero expected foreign sailors to have green eyes, but was disappointed to discover they were blue and even grey. Ashen-grey, the colour of the pervert's moustache, is a symbol of decay.

A strong yearning for travel is detected when the young hero watches the barges, which signal from far away by their curls of woolly smoke, the brown fishing fleet and the white sailing vessel being discharged on the opposite quay. He longed

run away to sea on board one of those big ships, and even by "looking at the high masts, saw or imagined, the geography which had been scantily closed to [him] at school gradually taking substance under [his] eyes" ⁴⁰.

The ending of An Encounter is crucial because it includes both climax and conclusion; they are, in fact, so closed as to be almost not quite identified:

How my heart beat as he came running across the field to me ! He run as if to bring me aid. And I was penitent; for in my heart I had always despised him a little ⁴¹.

Short stories often work towards a single moment of revelation, frequently described in Joycean term as an epiphany. To Joyce, epiphany meant " a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself" ⁴². He believed that a man of letters should record these epiphanies with extreme care because they are "the most delicate and evanescent of moments" ⁴³. He adds analytically: "Imagine my glimpse of that clock as the groupings of a spiritual eye which seeks its vision to an exact focus; the moment the focus is reached, the effect is epiphanized. It is just this epiphany that I find the tried, the supreme quality of beauty" ⁴⁴.

In An Encounter, the epiphany is a sensually apprehended image and emotionally vibrant; it communicates immediately the meaning of the young boy's experience; it contains in a brief and fleeting manner, a revelation of some physical, mental and emotional traits in the hero⁴⁵. Suddenly "the fundamental secret of things is made accessible and ordinary circumstances are transfused with significance"⁴⁶. Whether it is a shameful secret confessed or a clue interpreted, or a moral insight freshly grasped by the central character, many stories disclose a definite meaning, often referred to as "the point of the story"⁴⁷. In An Encounter, Joyce's principal concern is the awakening of consciousness where he ties the process down to one period of life, childhood. The hero is trapped in Dublin's narrow parochialism and the spirit of his adventure has been undermined by that city as well as by his own inner weakness.

Whatever the narrative technique and the form of presentation in An Encounter, the episode depicted is not only significant in itself but enriched and coloured by Joyce's style, symbols, images epiphanies.

NOTES

¹ See Letters of James Joyce, ed. by Stuart Gilbert, (New York, The Viking Press, 1957) p. 134.

² Ibid., p. 111.

³ James Joyce, Dubliners (Penguin Books, 1954) p. 17.

⁴ Ibid., p. 18.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., p. 19.

⁷ Ibid., p. 20.

⁸ Ibid., p. 21.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ See Epifanio San Juan Jr., James Joyce and the Craft of Fiction (Fairleigh, Dickinson University Press, 1972) p. 57.

¹¹ James Joyce, Dubliners, p. 22.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁸ Ibid.

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- ¹⁹ Ibid., p. 26.
- ²⁰ See J. I. M. Stewart, Eight Modern Writers (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1963) p. 431.
- ²¹ See Walter Allen, The English Novel (New York, A Dutton and Company, 1954) p. 427.
- ²² See C. H. Peake, James Joyce: The Citizen and the Artist (Edward Arnold Publishers Ltd.1977, p. 18.
- ²³ James Joyce, Dubliners, p. 17.
- ²⁴ See Epifanio San Juan Jr., James Joyce and the Craft of Fiction, p. 45.
- ²⁵ Ibid., p. 51.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ James Joyce, Dubliners, p.19.
- ²⁸ Ibid., p. 18.
- ²⁹ Ibid., p. 20.
- ³⁰ Ibid., p. 17.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² See C. H. Peake, James Joyce: The Citizen and the Artist, p. 21.
- ³³ Ibid., p. 19.
- ³⁴ James Joyce, Dubliners, p. 23.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ See C. H. Peake, James Joyce: The Citizen and the Artist, p. 50.

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- ³⁷ James Joyce, Dubliners, p. 25.
- ³⁸ See C. H. Peake, James Joyce: The Citizen and the Artist, p. 21.
- ³⁹ Ibid.
- ⁴⁰ James Joyce, Dubliners, p. 21.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., p. 26.
- ⁴² Epifanio San Juan Jr., James Joyce and the Craft of Fiction, pp. 24-25.
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid.
- ⁴⁵ Dorothy Van Ghent, The English Novel: Form and Function (Harper and Row Publishers, New York, 1961) pp. 268-269.
- ⁴⁶ Valerie show, The Short Story: A Critical Introduction (Longman, London and New York, 1983) P. 193.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 200.

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