



The Sisters

The Sisters opens the collection Dubliners. The narrator is a nameless boy, who immediately renders explicit the theme of 'paralysis' of the whole story.

James Joyce
Dubliners
(1914)

There was no hope for him this time: it was the third stroke¹. Night after night I had passed the house (it was vacation time²) 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 blind³ 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 idle⁴. 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*⁵ in the Euclid and the word *simony*⁶ 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 longed⁷ 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 out⁷ my stirabout⁸ 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 uncanny⁹ about him. I'll tell you my opinion...

He began to puff at his pipe, no doubt arranging his opinion in his mind. Tiresome¹⁰ old fool! When we knew him first he used to be rather interesting, talking of faints and worms¹¹; 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 chap¹² taught him a great deal, mind you¹³; and they say he had a great wish¹⁴ 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 beady¹⁴ black eyes were examining me but I would not satisfy him by looking up from my plate. He returned to his pipe and finally spat¹⁵ rudely into the grate.

– 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 lad¹⁶ 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 corner¹⁷. That's what I'm always saying to that Rosicrucian¹⁸ there: take exercise. Why, when I was a nipper¹⁹ 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 of mutton, he added to my aunt.

– No, no, not for me, said old Cotter.

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

- 1 **stroke**. Attacco, colpo apoplettico.
- 2 **vacation time**. Periodo di vacanza.
- 3 **blind**. Tenda.
- 4 **idle**. Senza senso.
- 5 **gnomon**. Figura geometrica.
- 6 **simony**. Simonia (peccato commesso da chi vende beni spirituali).
- 7 **ladling out**. Scodellando.
- 8 **stirabout**. Zuppa d'avena.
- 9 **uncanny**. Misterioso.
- 10 **Tiresome**. Seccante, noioso.
- 11 **faints and worms**. Essenze e alambicchi.
- 12 **old chap**. Vecchio.
- 13 **mind you**. Intendiamoci.
- 14 **beady**. Lucenti.
- 15 **spat**. Sputò.
- 16 **young lad**. Ragazzo.
- 17 **box his corner**. Cavarsela da solo.
- 18 **Rosicrucian**. Rosicruciano, membro di una società segreta di carattere esoterico; qui indica la predilezione del ragazzo per la solitudine e la vita sedentaria.
- 19 **nipper**. Ragazzino.



50 – 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 crammed²⁰ my mouth with stirabout for fear I might give utterance to my anger.
 Tiresome old red-nosed imbecile!

55 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 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
 60 receding into some pleasant and vicious²¹ region; and there again I found 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 moist²² 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
 65 Britain Street. It was an unassuming²³ shop, registered under the vague name of
*Drapery*²⁴. The drapery consisted mainly of children's boots 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-
 70 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.*²⁵

75 The reading of the card persuaded me that he was dead and I was disturbed to find
 myself at check²⁶. 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 smothered²⁷ in
 his great-coat. Perhaps my aunt would have given me a packet of High Toast²⁸ for him
 and this present would have roused him from his stupefied doze²⁹. It was always I who
 80 emptied the packet into his black snuff-box³⁰ 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 dribbled³¹ 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,
 85 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 shop-windows as I went. I found it strange that neither I nor the day seemed
 90 in a mourning³² 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 Bonaparte, and he had explained
 95 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
 100 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

- 20 I crammed. Riempii.
 21 vicious. Malvagio, corrotto.
 22 moist. Umide.
 23 unassuming. Modesto.
 24 Drapery. Tessuti.
 25 *R.I.P. Requiescat In Pace*
 (riposi in pace).
 26 at check. *Lett.*: in scacco,
 cioè, bloccato.
 27 smothered. Nascosto.
 28 High Toast. Tipo di tabacco.
 29 doze. Torpore.
 30 snuff-box. Tabacchiera.
 31 dribbled. Cadevano,
 scendevano.
 32 mourning. Triste, luttuoso.



as the *Post Office Directory* and as closely printed as the law notices in the newspaper,
 105 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 through³³ the responses of the Mass
 which he had made me learn by heart; and, as I pattered³⁴, he used to smile pensively
 and nod his head, now and then pushing huge pinches of snuff up each nostril³⁵
 110 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.

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
 115 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 tawny³⁶
 120 gold of a great bank of clouds. Nannie received us in the hall; and, as it would have
 been unseemly³⁷ 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
 up³⁸ the narrow staircase before us, her bowed head being scarcely above the level of the
 banister-rail. At the first landing she stopped and beckoned³⁹ us forward encouragingly
 125 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 tiptoe⁴⁰. 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.
 130 I pretended to pray but I could not gather my thoughts because the old woman's
 mutterings distracted me. I noticed how clumsily⁴¹ 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
 135 smiling. There he lay, solemn and copious, vested as for the altar, his large hands
 loosely retaining a chalice. His face was very truculent⁴², 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
 140 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 bidding⁴³, she poured 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
 145 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.

150 Eliza sighed again and bowed her head in assent. 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.

155 – And everything...?

– Father O'Rourke was in with him a Tuesday and anointed⁴⁴ him and prepared
 him and all.

33 put me through. Farmi studiare.

34 I pattered. Ripetevo meccanicamente.

35 nostril. Narice.

36 tawny. Bronzeo.

37 unseemly. Sconveniente.

38 toil up. Salire con fatica.

39 beckoned. Fece cenno.

40 tiptoe. Punta di piedi.

41 clumsily. Goffamente.

42 truculent. Truce.

43 bidding. Cenno.

44 anointed. Impartì l'Estrema Unzione.



- He knew then?
 – He was quite resigned.
 160 – 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.
 165 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 done⁴⁵ all we could, as poor as we are –
 170 we couldn'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 out⁴⁶. All the work we had, she and me, getting in the woman to wash him and then laying him out and then the coffin and then arranging about the Mass in the chapel. Only for Father O'Rourke I
 175 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.
 180 – Ah, there's no friends like the old friends, she said, when all is said and done, no friends that a body⁴⁷ 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
 185 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-tea⁴⁸ 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 shrewdly⁴⁹:
 190 – 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: then she continued:
 – But still and all he kept on saying that before the summer was over he'd go out
 195 for a drive one fine day just to see the old house again where we were all born down in Irish-town 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 rheumatic⁵⁰ 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
 200 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
 205 much for him. And then his life was, you might say, crossed⁵¹.
 – 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 reverie⁵². We waited respectfully for her to break the
 210 silence: and after a long pause she said slowly:
 – It was that chalice he broke... That was the beginning of it. Of course, they say it

- 45 **we done**. Abbiamo fatto (espressione dialettale).
 46 **wore out**. Sfinita.
 47 **a body**. *Lett.*: un corpo; *qui*: una persona.
 48 **beef-tea**. Brodo di carne.
 49 **shrewdly**. Con tono accorto.
 50 **rheumatic**. Reumatiche. Sta per *pneumatic*, 'pneumatiche' (il personaggio confonde i due termini).
 51 **crossed**. Sfortunata.
 52 **reverie**. Fantasticherie, sogno ad occhi aperti.



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...

215 Eliza nodded.

– That affected his mind, she said. After that he began to mope⁵³ 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.

220 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-like⁵⁴ softly to himself?

225 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...

53 **mope.** Essere depresso.

54 **laughing-like.** Come se ridesse.

LITERARY COMPETENCE

> VOCABULARY

1 **READ** the text and match the highlighted words with their meaning.

- 1 young person
- 2 yearned
- 3 hope, desire
- 4 smoothly
- 5 odd
- 6 expression
- 7 slightly

> COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

2 **READ** the first section of the text (lines 1-54) again and find out

- the setting in time;
- the setting in place;
- the characters involved and their actions.

3 **WRITE** down the piece of news given to the protagonist at dinner. Then state the boy's reaction and its reason.

News	→	Reaction	→	Reason
.....	
.....	

4 **IDENTIFY** the name of the dead person.

5 **STATE**

- the subject of the conversation between old Cotter and the boy's uncle;
- their attitude to education and culture;
- the mood of the narrator/protagonist.



6 READ the second section up to line 63 again. Note down what the narrator does after dinner.

7 COMPLETE the following table about the boy's dream.

People involved in the dream	Their actions	Their role

8 READ up to the end of the second section till line 117 again. What is the boy's attitude towards the priest's death the following morning? Justify your answer quoting from the text.

9 FOCUS on the figure of the priest the boy used to visit.

1 Complete the table below with words and expressions referring to this character.

Physical features	Clothes	Teachings given to the boy

2 Consider the adjectives used by Joyce to describe the priest and say what connotation they give this character.

10 CONSIDER lines 113-117 where the waking memory of the priest makes the boy think about his dream once again. What kind of atmosphere does the reference to Persia create? Is the dream complete now?

11 READ up to the end of the story again and answer the following questions.

- 1 Where do all the actions of the third section take place?
- 2 Who are the characters involved?
- 3 How is Father Flynn's corpse described?
- 4 What do Eliza and the boy's aunt speak about?
- 5 Some questions of the boy's aunt are left unfinished (lines 152 and 155). Can you think of a reason?
- 6 How does Eliza describe her brother's illness?
- 7 What caused the beginning of the priest's physical and mental decay?
- 8 Can you explain the last sentence of the short story?

➤ COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT

12 ANSWER the questions below about the structure of the story.

- 1 Does the story have an introduction or does it open *in medias res*?
- 2 Is the end open or closed?
- 3 How does it differ from the traditional short story?

13 CONCENTRATE on the narrator.

- 1 Note down
 - what kind of narrator he is;
 - whose point of view is adopted.
- 2 Does Joyce introduce the character of the boy in a traditional way? What is the reader obliged to do?



- 14 COMPLETE** the table below drawing a distinction between the actions really taking place in the story and those occurring in the boy's mind.

Real events	Actions in the boy's mind

- Compare the two columns: which is the longer? What does this imply? Does this feature affect the presentation of characters and the concept of time? Write down your conclusions.
- Can you think of the advantages and disadvantages of this technique of presenting characters?
- The access to the character's consciousness is provided by Joyce through the technique of 'epiphany', that is 'the sudden revelation of a hidden reality' through 'casual words or events'. Focus on lines 55-63 and explain what revelation the boy has through the dream.

- 15 CONCENTRATE** on the character of Father Flynn. He may be said to represent an archetypal father-figure.

- What are his mental state, the following paralysis and death symbols of?
 - Madness:
 - Paralysis:
 - Death:
- Complete the logical sequence and the one presented in the text regarding this character using the following words. Then answer the question below.

failure	paralysis	death	madness
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Logical sequence: → → →

Sequence read: → → →

Are they different? What does this difference point out?

- 16 CONSIDER** the other characters in the story. They can be grouped in two different categories. Identify them and complete the table below saying what they represent.

	Characters	Distinctive features
First category		
Second category		

- 17 FOCUS** on the title of the short story. Why do you think Joyce chose this title? Which are the distinctive features of the sisters?

- 18 ANALYSE** the language of the boy and that of the adults. Go through the list of adjectives below and tick the ones you consider most appropriate for each. Then summarise the features of the two registers.

	Adults	Boy
1 Formal.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 Informal.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3 Abstract.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4 Concrete.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5 Childish.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6 Rich in Irish phrases.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7 Ambiguous.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8 Evaluative.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9 Subjective.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10 Naturalistic.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11 Emphatic.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12 Symbolical.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13 Straightforward.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



- 19 CONSIDER** the chalice, the most important symbol of the story. What do you generally associate this object with? What do you think the chalice symbolises in the story?
- 20 NOTICE** that *The Sisters* opens and ends in darkness. Trace the various images of light and shadow through the story and show how they define the boy's feelings.

➤ **COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS WITH THE LITERARY CONTEXT OF THE AGE**

- 21 DISCUSS.** Refer to 6.16 to find analogies and differences between *Heart of Darkness* and *The Sisters* as regards the characters of Marlow and Kurtz on the one hand, and the characters of the boy and the priest on the other; their dominant mood; the end of the two stories; the narrative technique; the language used.