
James Joyce's Dubliners: An Analysis of the Exploration of the Seven Stages of Grief

The Seven Stages of Grief as Paralleled in Joyce's Dubliners

James Joyce, born in Dublin in 1882, spent most of his life abroad, specifically on the continent of Europe (Gay 194). Joyce firmly denounced almost every aspect of Dublin life, from politics to religion to social expectations. A strong presence of Catholicism and Irish nationalism made life in Dublin excruciatingly disobliging for a liberal spirit such as Joyce's. Benjamin Boysen, in an essay entitled "The Necropolis of Love," eloquently explains Joyce's distaste for the Dublin way of life as he states, "[h]e finds society repressive and suffocating, suppressing its subordinates socially and mentally in an unholy alliance with Christianity" (159). In addition to experiencing the strains of a conservative society on his own well-being, Joyce rather bluntly remarked that he blamed the death of his mother on the religious and nationalistic fervor of the time: "When I looked on her face as she lay in her coffin – a face gray and wasted with cancer – I understood that I was looking on the face of a victim and I cursed the system which had made her a victim" (Boysen 159).

It seems rather obvious that Joyce possessed a deep-rooted resentment concerning Ireland, specifically Dublin, and struggled during much of his life to cope with the damaging effects the region had on his psyche even after escaping its destructive trajectory. However, rather than avoiding the mental repetition of his experiences in Dublin and repressing psychological hardships, he contrarily made it the primary setting of several of his most famous works. Joyce's character development throughout the progression of his novel *Dubliners* seems to impeccably parallel the Kubler-Ross Model, otherwise known as the stages of grief. The original Kubler-Ross model depicts five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Yet, in an attempt to be as thorough as possible, I will use this essay to call upon the modified version, which includes two additional stages of grief – shock and testing – which have proved useful in the field of psychology in terms of understanding and facilitating change. Certain characters' demeanors and attitudes precisely mirror each of the seven stages of grief, which Joyce allows us to observe through his technique of stream-of-consciousness, in almost perfect chronology. Joyce utilizes his own fictional creations, whether consciously or unconsciously, to illustrate his own psychological journey towards reconciliation and represent his attempts to cope with the detrimental effects that Dublin life had on his own self-concept and sense of identity.

The first stage of grief in the adapted Kubler-Ross Model is shock. During this stage, an afflicted individual typically feels immobilized and in a state of paralysis. Processing of the trauma has yet to occur, and reactions and emotions are kept under the surface and may not be fully recognized. "An Encounter" in *Dubliners* is a prime example of this first stage of grief. The narrator of the story, an unnamed boy, is tired of the monotony of his life and plots a truant adventure with his friends to explore Dublin. However, on this adventure the boys encounter a questionable figure who settles next to them and initiates a conversation that would typically be deemed wildly inappropriate for children their age. As the old man speaks of whipping young boys with an air of distinct lust, the narrator begins to frighten and becomes inherently aware of the inappropriate nature of the discussion. Though he longs to rise from the ground and escape

the man's sadistic presence, he feels paralyzed and remains immobile, listening without eye contact to the unsettling discourse. The audience is given insight into the narrator's inability to act on his fear as he explains "I continued to gaze toward the foot of the slope, listening to him...I was still considering whether I would go away or not when the man came back and sat down beside us again" (Joyce, p. 18). As the narrator is young, this is likely his first experience with pedophilia and the perverted mindsets that seem to, according to Joyce, plague Dublin. This story symbolizes a loss of innocence and a little boy's inability to understand the gravity of a damaging situation. Before our very eyes, the narrator's childhood has been tarnished. Yet the narrator is still processing the series of events as the story concludes, and it is likely that he is not yet aware of the potentially injurious effects the morbid experience may have on his developing psyche. Paralyzed with fear and confusion, the young narrator accurately portrays the first stage in the cycle of bereavement. Whether Joyce had a similar experience is certainly possible, yet it is unable to be proven. It is entirely conceivable, however, that this story mirrors the cognitive and emotional facets of Joyce's first experience with the perverse and aggressive nature of Dublin life; unable to react or make a change, but newly cautious and aware.

As shock and paralysis are the initial reactions to traumatic news or events, the following stage in the cycle of grief is denial. During this stage, one may intentionally turn a blind eye to the reality of one's situation. One may go to great lengths to ignore an issue and convince themselves that it does not exist. Though the denial we observe in "After the Race" may not – to our knowledge – be stemmed from any sort of traumatic incident, the protagonist Jimmy Doyle is wholeheartedly set on a life of ignorance. A trait inherited from his father, Jimmy Doyle is entirely concerned with the material aspects of life. Constantly attempting to fit into a higher social class and accumulating an abundance of wealth, Doyle actively denies the reality of his life and place in society. After competing in a car race in Dublin with some prestigious figures, Doyle is enrapt in a flurry of recognition and pseudo-fame. While engaging in a card game after dinner, he allows himself to be made a fool by his "friends". Doyle wagers the small amount of money he does have, and tacks on additional "I.O.U's" as he is unable to admit defeat and pull himself from the game. By the end of the tale Doyle is rendered penniless and in debt, yet he naively reassures himself that come the morning he will surely feel better about the night's events. The irony in this thinking lies in the fact that as the cabin door opens, a grey shaft of light streams in; thus, signaling that tomorrow has already come, and the time to deny his foolish actions has come to an end. There are several potential realities when considering Joyce's relation to this story. On one hand, he could be speaking to the denial of those who live and remain in Dublin; oblivious to the succubus nature of the individuals and their happenings, while continuing to strive toward unattainable goals. The converse could be a depiction of his own sense of denial at some point. It is possible that Joyce tried to conform to the norms of Dublin life, ignoring red flags and the potential for self-destruction, before finally gaining clarity and removing himself from the cycle. Whatever the author's reasoning may be, the denial we observe in "After the Race" is palpable and clearly identifiable to anyone who has been on a similar path of coping with oppressive and detrimental situations.

After one makes the conscious, or sometimes unwilling, effort to confront the reality of an event or situation, the Kubler-Ross Model suggests that the following stage of the grieving process is anger. Upon reading Dubliners, the presence of rage as an overwhelming factor that exists in a healthy majority of the novel's stories is blatant. During the anger stage, an explosion of emotion occurs. One may swing wildly into a fit of rage as the influx of emotional processing increases. Feelings that were previously concealed or repressed in earlier stages comes to the surface with a vengeance. Individuals in this stage may have questions such as "why me?" and

“why not you?” (Smaldone, p. 426) For the purpose of providing a prime example of this enraged state of grief, I will stray slightly from the chronological progression of Joyce’s stories and call upon the character Farrington in “Counterparts”. Farrington, who is so full of rage he can barely control it, is a flawless representation of a psyche plagued by an intense and long-standing. Farrington faces a considerable amount of verbal abuse at work from his overbearing and disrespectful boss. He repeatedly takes breaks throughout the workday to have a drink, in a feeble attempt to collect himself in order to make it through his shift. Alcohol is without a doubt a coping mechanism for Farrington, though it proves wildly unhealthy and only heightens his deep-rooted rage. When his time at work has concluded, Farrington blows off steam by drinking excessively with his companions, spending all of his money and initiating multiple drunken altercations. When he finally decides to return home for the evening, he is met by one of his small boys who immediately receives the brute of Farrington’s rage. His poor boy, who merely attempts to build him a fire and prepare his dinner, receives a brutal beating that is a direct outlet for Farrington’s misdirected anger. Though his emotions are concentrated toward his lot in life and his discourteous employer, Farrington is aware that his family is the only opportunity he has to express his loathing for the aspects of his life which he feels he cannot control. The cycle of abuse is overwhelming in this tale, and the imagery depicts a vicious succession of mistreatment. It is highly probable that Farrington’s son will develop similar characteristics of an abuser, as he and many other citizens of Dublin are not likely to break out of such a forceful pattern. Joyce’s anger regarding his hometown is more than apparent, and the presence of Farrington’s tale is a mimicry of a similar rage he carried with him throughout his life, especially as he blamed the society of Dublin for his mother’s death. Though Joyce may have been on a path to healing and understanding, the wrath he felt toward those who had encumbered his life and the lives of his loved ones is impossible to overlook.

According to the Kubler-Ross Model, the following stage in the grieving process is bargaining. While in this stage of bereavement, an individual may feel the passion of fury dissolve and give way to sense of resignation. Yet this stage is not characteristic of total defeat, as one still feebly clings to a false promise of hope and the naïve idea that something may be reversed. In Joyce’s story “Two Gallants,” protagonist Lenehan finds himself in the business of scamming, with the help of his friend Corely, to make a living. While waiting for Corely to procure their next con, Lenehan becomes aware of his hunger and stops into a casual restaurant for a small meal. During this meal, we learn by way of interior monologue that Lenehan is painfully aware of his own poverty and lack of attainment. He wonders if he will ever come to his senses and secure a job and a home of his own. After he is replenished from his meal, he is in considerably better spirits and imagines a small glimmer of hope in his seemingly dismal future. Joyce illustrates this transitory desire for change as he writes “He might yet be able to settle down in some snug corner and live happily if he could only come across some good simpleminded girl with a little of the ready” (p. 46). If only he could marry rich, he thinks, then his slumming days would be over and he could finally experience happiness. Yet, as omniscient readers, we realize that this sort of hope is in vain. Lenehan does not wish to improve the status of his life through his own hard work and initiation, which would surely be a converse to the leech of a human he currently embodies, but rather expects to be simply handed a worthy life. His hope for a successful future is a fleeting illusion and we are solidified in our skepticism of his ability to make a genuine change come the end of the story. Lenehan catches up with Corely who, with a smile, flashes him a gold coin, signaling that the scam was successful. The story ends with the obvious conclusion that Lenehan will not, in fact, turn over a new leaf and pursue a more virtuous life; for the low road is often the easiest to travel. Joyce suggests here that the people of Dublin do not truly wish to prosper, for that would require a change of ethics and morality, but rather they

choose to simply “get by”. When expectations and standards decline, so does the risk for disappointment. Joyce insinuates rather obviously that many of these stages of grief, in terms of the Dublin way of life, are never fulfilled or actualized. The people of the region are destined to orbit the same disobliging society generation after generation. Joyce’s way of bargaining, or avoidance, in his case resulted in escape. Rather than allowing himself to be pulled back down into the current of self-defeat, Joyce acted where others shrank in fear and fled the despotic region of Dublin.

Following the succession of emotional processes in the Grief model is depression. This is arguably one of the most observable of the psychological stages. In the depression stage, an individual has fully accepted the nature of their reality and sinks into a state of deep despondency. It is in this stage that one may reject any attempt to rectify their cognitive patterns and become overwhelmed with hopelessness and begin the process of recognizing their own responsibility. In “A Painful Case” Mr. Duffy is the epitome of depression as he becomes a victim to the vacuum of his own despair. The unadventurous, monotonous nature of his life weighs down on him and he ponders his own shortcomings and missed opportunities. After learning of the death of a former lover, Mr. Duffy spirals into a quarry of self-pity and remorse. He becomes excruciatingly aware of the fact that he has denied himself of the only love he has ever experienced and embarks on an introspective journey of sorrow and regret. As he meanders around his city, he comes across a romantic couple in the park and has a crucial epiphany. Joyce illustrates this as he writes “He gnawed the rectitude of his life...no one wanted him; he was an outcast from life’s feast” (p. 98). It is at this point in the story that Mr. Duffy becomes all too cognizant of his own failures. He is aware that he has not lived a life of fulfillment and he has only himself to blame for his stagnation. Joyce’s own experience with depression is tangible throughout *Dubliners* and with Mr. Duffy’s tale it seems to come full circle. “A Painful Case” is symbolic of the crushing weight of Joyce’s own self-doubt. As Joyce, himself, traverses the journey of grief, his sense of loss and lack of vigorous development become unable to refute. He lends his character to the depiction of his own emotional and cognitive state and accepts responsibility for his own pain.

Upon entering the stage of depression, one may remain there for a considerable amount of time; wallowing in a pit of despair. Yet, most individuals come to the realization that one cannot possibly succeed in healing in such a masochistic state. The desire to rekindle one’s own spirit and proceed in a positive direction sparks the entrance into the next of the seven stages: testing. The testing stage is the second addition to the original five-stage model, in which the afflicted individual begins looking for novel ways to improve their mental health. Mr. Kenan’s character in “Grace” is inherent of this occurrence. After an incident in a pub, Mr. Kenan quite literally is deemed a “fallen man.” Upon reaching rock-bottom, Mr. Kenan allows a friend, Mr. Power, to assist him on a path to recovery. Though Joyce insinuates that his “help” is more of a conversion effort, Mr. Kenan attends the suggested church services and, skeptically, agrees to attend a religious retreat. Although it seems evident that Mr. Kenan is not truly capable of making a full recovery, as none of Joyce’s characters are allowed true redemption, the effort to seek a change is there. Mr. Kenan is at least half-heartedly committed to discovering a better path in life, a commitment that is characteristic of the testing stage in the cycle of grief. Mr. Kenan comprehends the notion that he cannot remain in a pit of darkness indefinitely and begins to experiment with realistic healing processes and healthier coping mechanisms. Though Joyce clearly denounced the institute of religion, specifically the Catholic church, in order to deal with the destruction of his past he, too, was forced to explore less self-deprecating outlets. It is possible that the whole of *Dubliners* is indicative of his own testing stage, and the novel itself is

a reflection of his healing process and progression towards resolution.

Once the decision has been made to investigate positive outlets and step out of the darkness of depression, the concluding stage of the bereavement process may finally be actualized. This final stage of acceptance is characterized by a shift toward stability. The afflicted individual has been through the motions of shock and denial, as well as anger and depression, and is now ready to move forward in life. Gabriel from "The Dead" is a beautiful example of peaceful acceptance. Perhaps the most hopeful of Joyce's tales, Gabriel is one of the very few characters in Dubliners to experience a genuine awakening. After learning of his wife's late lover, Gabriel finds he is actually able to relinquish his feelings of envy and rage and embrace a state of understanding. As he surrenders his need for control, Gabriel is able to adopt an objective perspective and he becomes aware of the interconnectedness of all aspects of life and death. He wisely accepts the truth that he has never actually known love as he previously assumed he had, and that his whole life has been merely a show for others; a façade he created for himself to hide behind the intimacy of existence. Again, Joyce expertly utilizes the stream-of-consciousness so that the audience can physically observe Gabriel's spiritual transformation. This renovation of self is apparent as Joyce illustrates "His own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world: the solid world itself which the dead had one time reared and lived in was dissolving and dwindling" (p. 194). Regardless of what Gabriel's final resolve is - whether he chooses death or to pursue an improved, more actualized existence - he has made the conclusive decision to progress. Gabriel makes the verdict to move forward in a newfangled state of awareness and self-actualization that is only possible when one accepts the reality of factors that one cannot control. With this final story, Joyce has reached the final stop on his own journey to reclamation. It is here that he displays wisdom and understanding and accepts the daunting facets of his past.

By way of interior monologue and the depiction of the self, Joyce uses his characters as a vehicle for the expression of his own tormented psyche. Although his characters and the actual living inhabitants of Dublin society may never have the opportunity to break free from the constraining cyclical nature of their existence, a psychoanalytic introspection at the progression of Dubliners suggests that Joyce has indeed completed his own tiresome seven-step process and, ultimately, gained the sentience necessary to reconcile with his troublesome past.