James Joyce and His War with the Catholic Church

By Kimball Gardner

Of the Catholic Church, James Joyce declared: “I make open war upon it by what I write and say and do” (qtd. in Lernout 332). This statement comes as a result of disillusionment he experienced in his life at a young age. In November of 1902, he wrote to Lady Gregory, a writer whose attention Joyce hoped to catch (Bowker 93): “I know that there is no heresy or no philosophy which is so abhorrent to my church as a human being” (Joyce, Letters of James Joyce 53). It is clear that Joyce felt mistreatment from his Church. Throughout his short stories in Dubliners (for example, in “The Sisters,” “Araby,” “The Boarding House,” and “Eveline”), Joyce depicts the Catholic Church in an extremely unfavorable light. In “The Dead,” we see a more complex and fascinating way in which Joyce attacks and criticizes the Church. It is a short story filled with references to Catholic theology and is a symbolic yet direct criticism of the Church by Joyce, who points out its flaws through characterization of them in main characters and in particular uses of imagery. He shows that the Catholic Church, though portrayed by Gabriel as a great entity, is in reality a corrupt, false institution, and can only be effective if it changes its ways to be more accepting of all people. He ultimately teaches the reader that if no action is taken, the Church and its corrupt followers will suffer the very punishment they preach: that of a symbolic eternity in hell because of sin. In other words, he warns of its eventual collapse as an institution, and even passes his own final judgment upon it.

Gabriel, the main character, offers an interesting perspective on Joyce’s thoughts toward the Catholic Church—specifically how he characterizes the domineering attitude of the Church in his interactions with others. Joyce paints Gabriel as a man who is conceited, arrogant, and who enjoys attention and control. At the beginning of the story, he is depicted as a man who speaks
condescendingly to or about others, especially women. For example, when speaking about his wife, he says mockingly, “my wife here takes three mortal hours to dress herself” (Joyce, “The Dead” 153). Speaking to Lily, he teases her in a way that makes her feel uncomfortable when he jokes about her “young man” that he hopes they will be seeing soon (154). Also, when speaking of Gabriel to her aunt Kate, Gretta herself says the line, “you’ll never guess what he makes me wear . . .” (Joyce, “The Dead” 156, emphasis added). These are just three examples of a greater list which serve to show that Gabriel seeks control and power over others. I suggest that this is symbolic of the Catholic Church, and how Joyce saw it as a domineering entity in the lives of the Irish. He was no doubt influenced by some of the philosophical thinkers of his time, such as George Moore (Lernout 335-36).

Geert Lernout informs us that Moore published a thesis criticizing the Church of being “the mortal enemy of life and art” (335). Furthermore, in an era where Protestantism abounded, the ideas of Martin Luther would have been rampant. Statistics show that the height of Protestant popularity occurred between 1881 and 1911, the same time period Joyce was writing Dubliners (Johnston). It is only logical that Luther’s ideas would be spread through Ireland at this time, and that Joyce, as an avid reader, would have read them. One idea which supports the idea that Joyce felt that the Church was too intimidating is the second thesis of Luther, which states basically that repentance as taught by Christ does not refer “to the sacrament of penance . . . as administered by the clergy” (“Luther’s 95 Theses,” emphasis added). I emphasize this to show that Luther clearly saw a problem with the Church, in that people were more accountable to corrupt priests than to God Himself. This is a belief seen in “The Dead,” as Gabriel can be easily seen as a characterization of the Catholic Church’s mentality of lording over its members.
Another aspect of Gabriel’s personality which reflects Joyce’s attitude toward the Catholic Church is his hypocrisy. It begins with his conversation with Miss Ivors, where he reveals his true thoughts concerning Ireland, saying that he plans to vacation in nations besides Ireland, that “Irish is not [his] language,” and that he “is sick of [his] own country” (Joyce, “The Dead” 164-65). His one-on-one conversation with Miss Ivors is a good indicator of how he truly feels. He is caught off guard by her questions as she undermines his usual collected self. He cannot respond quickly, thereby revealing his true feelings toward Ireland. Of this, the wise words of C.S. Lewis ring true: “Surely what a man does when he is taken off his guard is the best evidence for what sort of man he is? Surely what pops out before the man has time to put on a disguise is the truth?” (“Quote by C.S. Lewis”). To this point, Gabriel has not been hypocritical as he has stated his true feelings; however, his hypocrisy is revealed during his dinner speech which happens mere moments later. This discourse is laced with false patriotism for Ireland, as well as an extremely warm view of his nation. For instance, he says, “our country has no tradition which it does so much honour . . . as that of its hospitality” (Joyce, “The Dead” 176, emphasis added). Further on in his speech, he declares, “the tradition of . . . Irish hospitality, which our forefathers have handed down to us . . .” (“The Dead” 176, emphases added), which further exemplifies his feigned love of Ireland. The hypocrisy, then, is seen in how blatantly contradictory his earlier conversation with Miss Ivors is with the speech he gives at dinner. The dinner speech shows Gabriel in his collected state once more, and how he can easily pretend in front of an audience how much he loves Ireland and the emotional attachment he feels for it. It comes off as sincere, and perhaps when referring to certain people rather than Ireland itself, it can be. But when he essentially tells Miss Ivors that he is tired of Ireland, and feels no attachment nor patriotism for it, then his patriotic speech becomes the epitome of hypocrisy.
As is customary with James Joyce, the representation of hypocrisy through Gabriel is no accident; it serves as a connection to the Catholic Church. Likewise, other of Joyce’s stories include references to problems of Catholicism, which I cite to show that the idea of Joyce attacking the Church is common to him, culminating in the magnificent example that is “The Dead.” One example comes from Father Flynn in “The Sisters.” The entire story revolves around a mysterious and offensive act that occurred between the priest and a child before the priest’s death (Joyce, “The Sisters” 3-11). The fact that he was a Catholic priest who is clearly feeling guilty of the aforementioned crime clearly shows Joyce’s thoughts of the Church. The priest mentioned in “Eveline” becomes a fading memory: “she had never found out the name of the priest whose yellowing photograph hung on the wall . . .” (“Eveline” 27). In this case, Joyce wanted to show how unimportant the Church was. The example contained in “The Boarding House” is an interesting one, showing that the priest present at Mr. Doran’s confession made him feel so terrible about his situation that he felt as if all was lost (“The Boarding House” 55-56). Joyce’s lesson here was to show the attitude of the Church toward its members: one of domination and control. One final example comes from “Araby.” In the opening paragraphs, the text refers to a priest who had died “in the back drawingroom” (“Araby” 20). This is simply another placement of Joyce’s dislike of hypocritical priests, and the end he saw in store for them.

I cite these different examples to show Joyce’s common theme of portraying the Church in an unfavorable light. Most notably, the example from “The Sisters” is the best connection to Gabriel’s hypocrisy, because Father Flynn was very obviously a personification of the very same. Since “The Dead” is a much longer and complex work, it only makes sense that Joyce’s portrayal of the Church as hypocritical would also be much more complex. In this case, he chooses Gabriel as the representation of the Church’s hypocrisy.
Yet the development that Gabriel undergoes in “The Dead” is representative of what Joyce believed the Church should do: change its ways to be more open and accepting to all people. At the end of the story, Joyce depicts a tender moment between Gabriel and Gretta. He writes, “Generous tears filled Gabriel’s eyes. He had never felt like that himself towards any woman but he knew that such a feeling must be love” (Joyce, “The Dead” 194). This stands in stark contrast to what I discussed previously, and how Gabriel was a power-hungry male figure. This is due to Joyce’s brilliant character development throughout the story. Here at the end he is depicted as a more sensitive and understanding person who has been touched by what has happened in his life. Joyce, making the connection between Gabriel and the Catholic Church, portrays his beliefs as to the course that it should take. Similar to Gabriel, he envisioned the Church developing to the point that it would change its views to become more modern and socially acceptable, an idea which grew from his view of the Church as a source of “religious intolerance” (Bowker 93). Vincent Cheng suggests that Gabriel’s epiphany comes at the end of the story, and that it is actually a moment where he could begin his life again (362). This is what Joyce wanted the Church to do: to have this moment of epiphany to the extent that it would change and start over, thereby repenting of its errors. This being said, it is also notable that Gabriel is “sick of [his] own country” and that he is labeled a “West Briton,” according to Miss Ivors (Joyce, “The Dead” 165). These moments help lead Gabriel to his ultimate epiphany, and the moment where he realizes that he must leave his old life and beliefs, similar to Luther at the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. Though Joyce was not particularly fond of any religion during this period of his life, it makes sense that if he were truly making war on the Church through his writings, the most stinging way to do so would be to allude to one of the original acts of defiance against the Church: the Reformation begun by Martin Luther.
However, Joyce also shows the opposite possibility, and what happens if the Church does not change its way: the metaphorical punishment of its corrupt clergy in the very hell they warn of. In other words, he shows that, left unchanged, the Church would collapse. I reiterate the fact that Joyce believed that the Church “hated ‘human beings,’ and he wanted to escape the atmosphere of religious tolerance” in his early years (Bowker 93). For the Church to be intolerant of others and to show such dislike and hatred toward other human beings would break one of the two great commandments as taught by Jesus Christ: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (Matt. 22.39). If the Church professed to follow Christ and His teachings, and if it believed that “on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matt. 22.40), then in Joyce’s eyes it would most certainly be seen as sinning. In fact, hypocrisy is a sin widely condemned by Jesus Christ throughout the Bible, which adds further gravity to the Church’s case. Furthermore, the Church defines “sin” as “any deliberate infidelity to the will of God” (McBrien 1251). The Catholic Church itself also defines “hell” as “the final destination of the wicked” (McBrien 1175). According to all these definitions then, the unrepentant sinner will end up in hell. Therefore, the reader sees that Joyce wanted to make clear that if the Church did not change, it would suffer this very punishment. Of course, this is simply a metaphor, and in a literal sense, Joyce wanted to make clear that the Church would fall apart and become obsolete. This is why, as previously discussed, Joyce tried to embody what he thought the Church should do in the character of Gabriel. However, at the same time, he also conveyed a subtle message of what would happen if the Church did not heed his counsel.

I suggest that in the final moments of “The Dead” we see the true genius of James Joyce. By looking more deeply into Gabriel’s moment of epiphany, we can also see a deeper meaning: the final judgment of the Catholic Church by Joyce. His first judgment is done by utilizing
certain imagery which conveys a feeling of mystery and, in this case, a feeling of hopelessness and death. In the final paragraphs, Joyce uses words such as “grey,” “dwindling,” “dark,” and “barren,” to name just a few examples (“The Dead,” 194). Each of these carries with it the connotation of despair and even fear, which coincides with Joyce’s purpose: to convey that the judgment “will not go well with those who were unfaithful” (McBrien 1163). The theme of winter is also prevalent throughout the entire story, which is a very significant detail of imagery since it has traditionally been symbolic of death. It is the season in which all the trees lose their leaves, the ground is frozen over, and the skies become bleak and gray. What better natural representation of death can there be? Winter is placed after the newness of spring, the youthful joy of summer, and the aging of autumn. It can also be harsh and merciless, just as “those who break the law . . . will be judged mercilessly” (McBrien 1163). In direct support of this idea, the true telling line of these final paragraphs comes into play, as Joyce writes: “His soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead” (“The Dead,” 194). This prospect supports my claim, since it does not say that his soul was already in this region, but was approaching it. Gabriel faced a very important choice: he could choose to change, as discussed previously, and become a new person, or he could choose to not change, thereby moving closer to the realm of the dead. Though the text refers only to a “region” where the dead are and does not name one specifically, the context in which it is placed lends itself more to a reference to hell. In this way then, Joyce shows what he saw to be the true peril of the Catholic Church: suffering the consequences—meaning its downfall and destruction—for breaking the very commandments they taught.

Staying with the idea of imagery and judgment, Joyce makes additional connections between the names and symbols of Christianity and other traditions and his main message: that
the Church was held down by the very sins it condemned, such as lust, lying, and hypocrisy. One very interesting and unique way that he chooses to show this idea is through the use of names, in this case, Michael and Gabriel. Both of these are names of important angelic figures from the Bible. Michael is described “as ‘one of the chief princes,’ and leader of the forces of heaven” (“St. Michael, the Archangel”). Likewise, “the name Gabriel means ‘man of God,’ or ‘God has shown himself mighty’” (“St. Gabriel, the Archangel”). With these definitions in mind, it becomes clear that both Michael and Gabriel are very regal names with noble connotations. Both were instrumental as servants of God and, according to Catholic tradition, both are watchful protectors of certain groups. In contrast to these symbols of light, power, and virtue, Joyce includes references to much more sinister and foreboding images. For instance, about half of the pages of “The Dead” contain some kind of reference to darkness or blackness. According to Richard McBrien, hell “is shrouded in darkness” (1175). Furthermore, Michael’s second name, “Furey,” is reminiscent of the Greek Furies. The Furies were known as the goddesses of vengeance, and followed criminals who had escaped punishment. On top of that, the name “Furey” is also very closely related to “anger,” which just so happens to be one of the Catholic Church’s Seven Deadly Sins, or Cardinal Vices. However, one of the most important lines comes toward the end of the story: “One by one they were all becoming shades” (Joyce, “The Dead” 194). Once again, the shades referred to in this sentence are an allusion to the Greek shades, or the heartless spirits of the dead that haunted the River Styx until arriving in Hades (hell).

Yet with all these religious and mythological symbols, what was Joyce trying to prove? I suggest that he wanted to show once more that it didn’t matter who the Church thought it was. It didn’t matter if it proclaimed itself to be righteous and completely without sin. It too was subject to the sins of the very humanity that he claimed it hated. By using the names of two great
archangels and portraying them in a story filled with sins such as lying, anger, lust, and hypocrisy, Joyce tries to show the reader that the Church is no better than the rest of mankind. In fact, I would further suggest that with this message, Joyce even wanted to get the point across to the Church itself. Gabriel, as previously discussed, struggled with lying, hypocrisy, and even bouts of anger and lust, as characterized in one example, when his “anger began to gather again at the back of his mind and the dull fires of his lust began to glow angrily in his veins” (Joyce, “The Dead” 190). Michael is not explicitly mentioned as evil, and is not even a symbol of any terrible sin. However, the fact remains that he stayed in Gretta’s life as more of a shade than an angel. In this sense, then, both Gabriel and Michael act as fallen angels—further symbols of the degenerate Catholic Church that Joyce saw.

One final aspect of imagery I wish to discuss is that of emptiness, which ties into this final attack on the Church by Joyce concerning the final judgment. Throughout the story, and including the title itself, Joyce refers multiple times either to death or to those who are dead. For example, while Mary Jane plays her piano piece, Gabriel’s eyes wander to two portraits: the first from Romeo and Juliet, the Shakespearean masterpiece that ended with both main characters dying, and the second “a picture of the two murdered princes in the tower” (Joyce, “The Dead” 161). Later, Bartell D’Arcy sings the line “My babe lies cold . . .” (183). And of course these references to death simply serve as foreshadowing of the moment when Gretta utters simply of Michael Furey, “he is dead” (191). The story is so replete with the memories of the dead, or the fear of death, or any other allusions to death, that even the very relationships and interactions appear to be “dead” in their own way. The interactions lack sincerity, or are hostile, and the whole dinner party seems to be detached from the rest of the world. There is a sense of other-worldliness about the story which separates the characters from the world in a dark and gloomy
way. In essence, all of these examples serve to convey a sense of detachment and emptiness. Yet as is customary of James Joyce, this was not by accident. He wanted to make one final attack against the Church that he despised so much during this time of his life. By placing the aforementioned characterizations of the Church within a story so pervaded by emptiness, Joyce’s final message to the Church is clear: it too is a dead institution, devoid of truth. After all is said and done, and after all the lying, hypocrisy, and intolerance, Joyce wants it to be known both to all people that he believes that there is no truth in the teachings of the Catholic Church, and that it will soon be exposed as a fraud.

The brilliance of James Joyce’s writing can only be truly appreciated when interpreted on different levels. In “The Dead” he introduces complex ideas concerning religion and spirituality, especially regarding his conflict with the Catholic Church. Because of the injustices he saw coming from an institution that claimed to follow God and His teachings, Joyce set out to make these horrors known to the rest of mankind. In this piece, Joyce not only teaches what the Church must do to change, but he shows the dangers of what might happen if it fails to do so. He makes it very clear that if it does not change, the Church will collapse. He is adamant that the Church was an extremely imperfect institution, and fell victim multiple times to the lust, anger, hypocrisy, and intolerance that so easily beset the human race. In a nation which had for so long embraced Catholicism, Joyce made a bold move in attacking it as he did. Yet when one thinks of the situation in this light, it makes even more sense. Both Ireland and the Catholic Church had let Joyce down, meaning that it is very well possible that Joyce could have included Ireland in his anger when he declared forcefully of the Church, “I make open war upon it by what I write and say and do” (qtd. in Lernout 332).
Works Cited


