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Reframing the Familiar: Joyce's *Dubliners* Revisited

PETER VAN DE KAMP, *Whodunits in Dubliners: What Joyce Says and How He Means*.
Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022.
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Neil Murphy

Joyce's *Dubliners* is certainly one of the most analysed collections of short stories in literary-critical history, which ensures that marking out new territory is exceedingly challenging and perhaps even foolhardy. Nonetheless, *Whodunits in Dubliners* manages the almost inconceivable: it presents genuinely new readings of each of Joyce's short stories. This embarrassment of interpretational riches is what van de Kamp contends with in his work; he exposes its riches of embarrassment by one simple observation—that “somehow we don't read what it says in *Dubliners* ... because we know better” (xiii). We know better, van de Kamp proposes, than to accept Joe's assertion that Maria, the prim and proper spinster in “Clay,” is his ‘proper mother’; we dismiss James Duffy's thoughts, in “A Painful Case,” that “in certain circumstances he would rob his bank”; or the aunt's fear in “Araby” that the bazaar is “some Freemason affair”; or Eveline's protest, in her story, that “it was impossible” to sail away with Frank. Van de Kamp argues that Joyce pretends to bond with us in an “ironic mode,” but that he really sends us up an interpretational garden path, laughing at us knowing better. This double (or perhaps triple) layered play is repeatedly pointed out by van de Kamp as he, at times radically, renegotiates what we thought we knew about what Joyce was doing.

Dubliners' protagonists, van de Kamp demonstrates, guide us along this wrong path: they take their own narratives for real. And so, van de Kamp provocatively argues, have we. We fall for Eveline's view of herself as a latter-day Cinderella, and we think of Mrs. Mooney as a formidable Svengali masterminding her daughter's shotgun wedding. However, their actions belie their fictions: what they actually do throughout most of their stories is—sit! From this stasis, the readers weave what they think to be true. Stasis, of course, informs all of *Dubliners'* fictional narrators—from the boy (or boys) in the childhood stories, whose impossible ghost tale, halfpenny adventure, and courtly romance are exposed by mundane reality, to Gabriel Conroy in “The Dead,” trapped in his own rhetoric, to Polly and Mr. Doran in “The Boarding House”—at least in those moments we are granted access to them together. And even after Eveline rises from her seat by the window, she metaphorically sits inside herself while imagining movement, as Frank beckons her to leave with him—that is, to move.

But it is not just the protagonists who delude and are deluded. Narrators and implied narrators also lead us astray, with the conspiratorial winks and nudges of implication and presupposition. They insinuate that Father Flynn in “The Sisters” is a pedophile, that Maria in “Clay” is a hideous, dying old spinster, that Mr. Duffy in “A Painful Case” is gay, that Polly in “The Boarding House” is pregnant, that Mrs. Kearney in “A Mother” lacks tact, that Mr. Kernan in “Grace” is pushed, that Corley seduces an innocent girl to give him money, and that Chandler shows up Ignatius Gallaher for being a buffoon.

Van de Kamp's method is that of a sleuth, a close-reading one—that perhaps old fashioned but essential tool when teasing one's way through Joyce's intricacies. Or, as Anne Fogarty claims in her elegant Preface: “in the successive analyses entered into here he carefully unfurls the exegetical

processes involved in teasing out the complexities of Joyce's stories and the debates that need to be entered into in order to make sense of their stylistic and rhetorical features" (xi). Van de Kamp is not afraid to reveal his learning as he asks us to be persuaded by his re-framing of these so-familiar stories—so familiar indeed that van de Kamp's readings do what seems impossible: he makes them feel new. Deploying classical logic and rhetoric to contemporary linguistics and pragmatics, trawling through all forms of evidence (contextual, intertextual, paratextual), the volume feels, at times, as much a journey into a 'van de Kampian' critical imaginary as much as it is a re-habitation of *Dubliners*.

In his "Preamble," van de Kamp admits that this book took a long time to write—over 25 years. The time taken on his book is demonstrated, not just in its attempt to be comprehensive, but in its scholarly plenitude of references and footnotes coupled with the development of van de Kamp's own styles and techniques. Van de Kamp's method is to engage with the reader; he is at times showy, frequently verbally dexterous (he cannot resist punning, playing, teasing out patterns only to supersede them with more daring commentaries). But overall, his technique always seems to develop from provocative interpretation to scholarly contextualization. He shocks, then proves—usually in very compelling ways.

The earlier chapters offer audacious close readings—most persuasively so in the masterful analysis of "Eveline," which shows how we are led astray by the Cinderella dissonance of the protagonist, abandoning obvious fact, and discarding the story's (and the eponymous heroine's) exploitation of ambiguity—the father quarrels with Frank as he "sees her home," while in the end the story "leaves her home."

Some of van de Kamp's earlier interpretations are tongue-in-cheek; he claims only to provide readings "that hold up in court" (a phrase he uses several times), but it's hard to accept that "The Sisters" is a murder mystery. Van de Kamp is well aware of this: he is not categorical about his interpretations. In fact, he is less concerned with *what* Joyce means than with *how* Joyce means, which is perhaps a requirement of all sound-headed criticism. His interpretations are open-ended, almost Joycean themselves. Several chapters end with questions. But he shows the power of Joycean implication, of characters' fathoming each other's intentions, saying what they don't mean and meaning what they don't say. This makes for some intricate interpretation, nowhere more so than in the analysis of Mr. Cunningham's 'Hm' in "Grace."

In his later chapters, van de Kamp amply substantiates his forensic close analyses with detailed historical and political evidence. In "Grace," he identifies "the great Blackwhite" as Alderman Richard Wilson, Dublin's conservative Mayor Elect who got his nickname from accusing the Liberals in the City Council of opposing a Police Bill by voting black white. The Bill was designed to redress the Catholic dominance of the Dublin Metropolitan Police by subsuming it into the Royal Irish Constabulary—it had been noted that members of the DMP were in cahoots with the Jesuits of Gardiner Street, who had set up a special service, *and* a special library with devotional literature, for them. 'Blackwhite' Wilson effectively got shafted by the Liberals for his accusation; they blocked his election as mayor and used every opportunity to lambast him for the rest of his life. Principal among Wilson's adversaries was Sir John Gray, the unveiling of whose statue is remembered in "Grace." Van de Kamp persuasively argues that "the story is not a droll recording of some of Dublin's ill-informed Catholics' endeavour to put a friend on the wagon: it is an informed accusation of the nets that were flung over Dublin by those that Joyce knew too well—his teachers, his father's political friends, his own circle." An identification of an extratextual paralysis that hung over Joyce's Dublin clearly comes into view with such readings.

Van de Kamp also reveals how Joyce's political engagement—or, at least, awareness—informs many of the stories. He demonstrates that Mr. Duffy's socialism needs to be taken seriously in "A Painful Case," but also that the vagaries of the Dublin electric light scheme underlie "Two

Gallants,” and shimmer in the ghostly light at the end of “The Dead,” as Gabriel looks out at Richard Wilson’s former linen merchant’s in Upper Sackville Street. Van de Kamp even argues that in reality the electricity in the Gresham did go out, as the old electricity network was being replaced by a newer one.

There is nothing orthodox about *Whodunits*— which appears to be written with both the provocations of the enthusiast and the deftness of the informed, scholarly hand. Van de Kamp devotes a chapter to each of the stories, but he presents them in the order of conception—and not, as per usual, in the order of Joyce’s book, an altogether different thing. This allows van de Kamp to show the development of Joyce’s technique, which in turn influenced Joyce’s revisions, showing how the writing of a later story, such as “An Encounter,” enabled Joyce to revise an earlier one, such as “The Sisters.” Development thus becomes recirculation and evolution.

Van de Kamp continues the tradition of Margot Norris’ *Suspicious Readings of Joyce’s Dubliners* with detective readings. *Whodunits* deserves to be a classic for Joyceans, both scholars and general readers. This book is truly original, exemplary in its fastidious research, and—perhaps rare for a critical text—tremendous fun in its own Joycean asides and innuendo.

—NTU Singapore