

An Analysis of the Narrator in 'A Painful Case'

Hiroko Sugimura

0. Introduction

James Joyce is a skillful writer. He did many technical experiments in his writings to produce certain effects on the reader: use of metaphor, shift of perspectives, elaborate mode of speech or thought presentation such as 'a stream of consciousness', etc. The anthology of short stories, *Dubliners*, also has a repertoire of his art of skills to show the reader, probably, in order to describe the morbid mental condition observed in every protagonist, 'paralysis', which is said to have been the key in conception to Joyce. This paper analyses the role of the third person narrator with respect to mode of speech or thought presentation in 'A Painful Case'.

'A Painful Case' might have been discussed enough so far. Among others, critics are interested in what the title of the story refers to. The title has some ambiguity because it's 'a' painful case, not 'the' painful case, which produces a variety of interpretations of this issue. The reader is the most likely to agree to the idea that Mr. Duffy [hereafter, Duffy] represents the living dead, and that eventually his personality and character pushes himself into a relentless tragedy: he becomes 'painfully' aware of his sole soul mate being lost forever at the very end of the story. Therefore the story is about 'his' painful case, but it is true that the text prevents us from just focusing on him. Mary Lowe-Evans (1995), who discusses Mrs. Sinico in particular in the article 'Who Killed Mrs. Sinico?', states as follows:

If the opening belongs to Duffy, the title that precedes it belongs to Emily Sinico for it introduces the report of her death. And even granting the title a certain ambiguity, the pain-filled life and death of Emily Sinico are undeniably central to *Dubliners* both in terms of their physical location in the story cycle and in regard to their symbolic value. (Lowe-Evans, 396) [emphasis mine]

Mrs. Sinico is not only a victim in the train accident, but also considered as a symbolic 'victim' figure among all the characters in *Dubliners*. Lowe-Evans claims that 'a painful case' refers to Mrs. Sinico's death although she admits the title doesn't denote definitely that it's her case. Her feminism-oriented view on this text might go too far, but it can be said that she is endorsed by another critic, David G. Wright (1999), who discusses Emily Sinico in relation to Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*. Wright has it that:

One intriguing minor puzzle in *Ulysses* that may be clarified in this way is that Bloom three times mentions or thinks about Emily Sinico, who appears as a central character in 'A Painful Case' but otherwise plays no apparent role in *Ulysses*. (Wright, 104)

Probably Joyce still had Mrs. Sinico as a key figure in his mind when he set about writing the

masterpiece, Ulysses, partially because he was also engaged in refining the drafts of Dubliners at that time. Mrs. Sinico was so attractive to him that he could not abandon the idea of using her in the ongoing work. Thus, to the reader, 'A Painful Case' may be a double focused story with the two main characters, if not evenly, being paid particular attention to. The author was believed to consider Mrs. Sinico as a serious case of paralysis: she faces hard times in life with nobody around her giving attention or consideration to her, and finally loses her only hope when Duffy rejects her, which leads her to death. Examining the narrator and the narrative strategy, however, it is remarkably clear that what Joyce wants to address is the case of Duffy as the center of attention, because nothing about Mrs. Sinico is reported from her point of view. In this story the two modes of presentation work effectively in describing what Duffy is and how he feels. The discussion below starts with the presumption that the narrator follows the two narrative principles, which are based on the two aspects of the protagonist's personality and character.

1. The two narrative principles controlling the narrator

If a novelist successfully renders what s/he has as conception by using narrative devices, the created work would be called a masterpiece. In other words, using the traditional terms of 'form and content', content is the best described when form is chosen the most appropriately. In this respect, 'A Painful Case' is one of the most successful stories.

The passages below are connected with the two facets of his character respectively, which might be contradictory to each other. The passage (a) shows he is rational enough to distance him from his 'self', whereas the passage (b) tells about his intense emotion as it could be guessed from the word 'entangle'.

(a) He [Mr. Duffy] lived at a little distance from his body, regarding his own acts with doubtful side-glances. He had an odd autobiographical habit which led him to compose in his mind from time to time a short sentence about himself containing a subject in the third person and a predicate the past tense. (90) [emphasis mine]

(b) Little by little he [Mr. Duffy] entangled his thoughts with hers [Mrs. Sinico's]. (93) [emphasis mine]

These two aspects of Duffy's character are explored by making a switch between the two ways of presentation: speech and thought.

'A Painful Case' is narrated by a third person narrator, who is not omniscient but has a limited point of view. He only knows what Duffy does. Therefore, the narrator must stop telling for a while halfway up to the end of the story, and make the newspaper article intrude itself into his narration in order to provide the information of Mrs. Sinico's death. In the passages before the newspaper text the narrator makes the same gesture in narrating as that of Duffy in the strange habit of writing about himself objectively, but after the newspaper text, on the other hand, he makes Duffy open up and show his feelings to the

reader as if he would try to have an emotional connection with someone else. The reader should also experience a drastic psychological change that happens to Duffy after reading the newspaper.

Now the text of this short story is divided into three parts for the convenience of discussion: the newspaper text, and the texts before and after it. In the next section, the parts except the newspaper text will be studied regarding the degree of the narrator's control of report in the modes of presentation, which will clarify how effectively Duffy's life, both physical and mental, is rendered by these narrative principles.

2. Speech presentation in the text before the newspaper article

Before the newspaper article, the narrator uses a variety of speech presentation according to his narrative strategy in order to show the exchange of words between Duffy and Mrs. Sinico. No original speech by Mrs. Sinico is reproduced in direct speech (DS) except the example below, probably because the narrator prefers to emphasize Duffy's speech. Only what she says at the concert hall when she meets Duffy for the first time is reported as below:

(1) The lady who sat next him looked round at the deserted house once or twice and then said:

--What a pity there is such a poor house to-night! It's so hard on people to have to sing to empty benches. (91)

Contrary to the above, the narrator almost 'silences' her in the following sentence:

(2a) 'She asked him why did he not write out his thoughts' (93).

In the sentence (2a), the question she asks is reported in indirect speech (IS) to avoid the immediacy although there is the inversion of subject and verb characteristic of a question. Furthermore, the sense of a question will become obscured so soon when it is followed by the passage below where Duffy appears to speak directly to the reader.

(2b) For what, he asked her, with careful scorn. (2c) To compete with phrasemongers, incapable of thinking consecutively for sixty seconds? (2d) To submit himself to the criticisms of an obtuse middle class which entrusted its morality to policemen and its fine arts to impresarios? (93) [emphasis mine]

The sentence (2b) includes an incomplete sentence 'For what' as a question, with the introductory reporting clause 'he asked her' suggesting the presence of the narrator, whereas the next sentences (2c) and (2d), both beginning with 'To' as an infinitive, would seem to be the ones reported in free indirect speech (FIS). The former, in particular, even would seem an example of the free direct speech (FDS). Since there is no pronoun and time expression with tense, it sounds as if it were just produced by Duffy without any interference by the narrator.

In contrast with the sentence ‘She asked him why did he not write out his thoughts’, it has a question mark at the end of the sentence, which makes Duffy’s voice stand out more clearly. The sentence (2d) has a pronoun ‘himself’ in it, which shows it is reported in FIS notwithstanding a question mark at the end. Therefore it may have kind of immediacy and as much impact on the reader as the sentence (2c). This presentation of speech gives evidence that the narrator has a bias in favor of Duffy. The below is another example, showing it’s narrated based on Duffy’s interest or sense of values.

(3) Sometimes in return for his theories she gave out some fact of her own life. (92)
[emphasis mine]

Here what she talks about her life is not reported in DS nor FIS, but it’s much more briefly summarized: ‘some fact of her own life’. This summary in a few words implies that Duffy hardly cares about the fact of her case, and that he just wants to have her ‘listen to’ and understand his talk despite the fact that he is not trying to listen to and understand her grief or emptiness in life. The narrator avoids telling the heart of the problem that Mrs. Sinico has, and pretends not to know about it at all. Thus, examining closely the shift in the mode of narrative or speech presentation finds the narrator in ‘A Painful Case’ controls his report in favor to Duffy, not to Mrs. Sinico, which seems to prove the tragedy that the title refers to is the one of Duffy as a protagonist.

However, it cannot be denied that there is something ironic with the narrator’s tone towards Duffy. For example, Duffy despises the people in the labor union as just a ‘phrasemonger’, but he’s also a phrasemonger when he says smugly, ‘every bond ... is a bond to sorrow’ or ‘Love between man and man is impossible because there must not be sexual intercourse and friendship between man and woman is impossible because there must be sexual intercourse’. Also, the narrator gives an unnecessary remark about ‘A complete Wordsworth’ on his bookshelves, and betrays Duffy’s reading preference for romanticism. Finally Mrs. Sinico’s sole actual words, ‘What a pity there is such a poor house to-night! It’s so hard on people to have to sing to empty benches’, sound to ridicule sarcastically Duffy’s odd habit of writing about himself because he’s totally isolated and there is no reader of it.

In spite of these, still does the narrator focalize him in the narrative from the beginning to the end. Thus, the reader is urged to see everything through Duffy’s perspective. And besides, in this part in particular, all the words by Mrs. Sinico but one (‘What a pity there is such a poor house to-night! It’s so hard on people to have to sing to empty benches.’) are somewhat strongly controlled by the narrator; and if ‘some fact of her own life’ were presented as her original speech is, i.e., if she could talk about her life on her own, the strategy that the narrator takes to keep an objective view toward everything would collapse. So, here too, what comes from inside of himself is reported as objectively as possible.

(4) Sometimes he caught himself listening to the sound of his own voice. He thought that in her eyes he would ascend to an angelical stature; and, as he attached the fervent

nature of his companion more and more closely to him, he heard the strange impersonal voice, which he recognised as his own, insisting on the soul's incurable loneliness. We cannot give ourselves, it said: we are our own. (93) [emphasis mine]

In this passage, the indirect thought (IT) sentence 'He thought that in her eyes he would ascend to an angelical stature' appears, but immediately the IS sentence 'it said: we are our own' follows it. 'It said' should be changed to 'he thought' because he knows the impersonal voice is his own, but the mode of speech presentation is preferred here in order to avoid showing Duffy's emotional involvement in his own self. Thus, it can be said that the mode of speech presentation is connected with emotional detachment.

3. Thought presentation in the text after the newspaper article

In marked contrast with the mode of speech presentation used to subdue the emotional tone, thought presentation works as a tool for describing vividly how Duffy's feeling changes every moment. Thus, the narrator controls the on-off switch for the two types of presentation, and in the part after the newspaper text he reveals the other side of Duffy's nature.

Duffy hates to live in the center of city, and avoids encountering his own self by seeing himself as an object of observation. That is, his psychological distance to his self is also reflected in his physical one: he lived far from the city as the center to the people in Dublin, and viewed it from outside of the city. This objective way of viewing things by the protagonist is followed by the narrator, and reflected in the narrative until the text of the newspaper article is inserted in. In the middle of the text, he abruptly gives up the control of report, and allows an impersonal narrator in the newspaper article to provide the information of how she was killed in the train accident.

(5) He read it not aloud, but moving his lips as a priest does when he reads the prayers Secreto. This was the paragraph:

DEATH OF A LADY AT SYDNEY PARADE
A PAINFUL CASE

Today at the City of Dublin Hospital the Deputy Coroner (in the absence of Mr. Leverett) held an inquest on the body of Mrs. Emily Sinico, aged forty-three years, who was killed at Sydney Parade Station yesterday evening...(95)

The perspective taken here is completely free from Duffy's. The newspaper tells dispassionately and quite objectively about the situation of the accident and the victim Mrs. Sinico based on the interviews with the people concerned. An impersonal narrator in the newspaper reports the accident from several angles of vision. Otherwise, Duffy could never know what happened to Mrs. Sinico after they broke up.

Duffy experiences mixed feelings about the accident immediately after reading the article, but his feeling is gradually changing from fury and disgust to sorrow and the sense of loss. This article stirs his feelings, or evokes emotional aspects in him. The narrator resumes

telling the reader how emotionally Duffy responds to Mrs. Sinico's death. The latter half of the story starts as follows:

(6) Mr. Duffy raised his eyes from the paper and gazed out of his window on the cheerless evening landscape. The river lay quiet beside the empty distillery and from time to time a light appeared in some house on the Lucan road. (96-7)

Here the focalization is Duffy, and the narrator reports what he sees. However, all of sudden, the tone of the narrator changes to the very emotional one, 'What an end!' (97), which is apparently reported in free indirect thought (FIT) or free direct thought (FDT), as Duffy's first response. Moreover it is followed by the passage below:

(7) The whole narrative of her death revolted him and it revolted him to think that he had ever spoken to her of what he held sacred. The threadbare phrases, the inane expressions of sympathy, the cautious words of a reporter won over to conceal the details of a commonplace vulgar death attacked his stomach. Not merely had she degraded herself; she had degraded him. He saw the squalid tract of her vice, miserable and malodorous. (97) [emphasis mine]

The status of these sentences is not FIT except the underlined part for which it might be reported in FIT. And also the first sentence in the passage, 'The whole narrative of her death revolted him and it revolted him to think that he had ever spoken to her of what he held sacred,' could be FIT because of the repetition of the same word 'revolted' that is one of the verbs related to one's feeling. Or, Norman Page would have called it 'a submerged' thought. Here, too, the narrator describes what he thinks about the article and Mrs. Sinico's death. The same pattern of thought presentation, the alternate appearance of FIT or FDT and NRTA, can be observed as below:

(8) His soul's companion! (FIT or FDT) He thought of the hobbling wretches whom he had seen carrying cans and bottles to be filled by the barman. (NRTA) Just God, what an end! (FIT or FDT) Evidently she had been unfit to live, without any strength of purpose, an easy prey to habits, one of the wrecks on which civilisation has been reared. (FIT) But that she could have sunk so low! (FIT) Was it possible he had deceived himself so utterly about her? (FIT) He remembered her outburst of that night and interpreted it in a harsher sense than he had ever done. (NRTA) He had no difficulty now in approving of the course he had taken. (NRTA) (97)

This quick switching among varieties of thought presentation helps to depict Duffy's state of emotional strain, and to dramatically show that his physical movements are accelerated as well. Actually he is driven to unstable and relentless moving and walking around the city from this passage on.

Unlike the narrator in 'Eveline', this narrator never forsakes the protagonist. In 'Eveline', at the end of the story, the narrator suddenly stops telling what she decides or how she feels about her future, and distances himself from Eveline. For the narrator in 'A Painful Case', however, things are different. This is the last passage there:

(9) He turned back the way he had come, the rhythm of the engine pounding in his ears. He began to doubt the reality of what memory told him. He halted under a tree and allowed the rhythm to die away. He could not feel her near him in the darkness nor her voice touch his ear. He waited for some minutes listening. He could hear nothing: the night was perfectly silent. He listened again: perfectly silent. He felt that he was alone.
(99) [emphasis mine]

There seems to be neither FIT nor FDT in this passage that helps to describe one's feeling in a dramatic way, and the reader recognizes the presence of the narrator in the text. But it does not prevent the reader from being absorbed in or committing himself into Duffy because the first sentence 'He turned back the way he had come' has a figurative meaning as well as a literal one. In fact Duffy retraced his way, but it sounds as if he is going back to the days he spent together with Mrs. Sinico because the word 'memory' soon appears. He uses some of the physical faculties, hearing in particular, to find the evidence that Mrs. Sinico was there at one time. Both 'the night was perfectly silent' and 'perfectly silent' are probably FIT even if they don't have any reporting clause nor a verb 'think'. Rather than 'thinking' that is the process of reasoning, here, the very last sentence uses 'felt' as an emotional reaction, so it could be said that the narrator tries to explore Duffy's feeling deeper although he doesn't use FDT nor FIT as before. The narrator considers Duffy as a silly man, but feels kind of sympathy towards him at the same time when he tells the reader that Duffy admits 'he was alone'.

4. Conclusion

This paper examined the narrator's control of report by using the two types of presentation: speech and thought. The narrator might keep a distance between himself and Duffy in some sense, but he reports everything through Duffy's perspective. Therefore he should give up the role of a narrator in allowing the reader to know what has become of Mrs. Sinico. Instead an impersonal narrator in the newspaper takes the role of making a report on it.

The narrative strategy he takes is based on Duffy's character, which consists of two aspects: rational and emotional. In order to describe Duffy's two-faceted character, speech presentation and thought are used in the text before and after the newspaper respectively. Before Duffy knows about the death of Mrs. Sinico, the mode of speech presentation is used to tell the relationship between him and her, and even his own feelings are observed objectively: 'it said'. On the other hand, in the part after the newspaper, thought presentation is used to show the other side of his character, his feelings. A variety of thought presentation is used

there, and quickly changed from NRTA to FDT, which produces an effect of accelerating Duffy's physical movement as well. Until the end, the narrator in this story tells the reader about how the protagonist feels, unlike the one in 'Eveline'.

Text

Dubliners. New York and London: Norton Critical Edition, 2006.

*Page references in brackets refer to the above text.

References

Connolly, Thomas E. "A Painful Case." *James Joyce's "Dubliners": Critical Essays*. Ed. Clive Hart. New York: Viking Press, 1969. 107-21.

Corrington, John William. "Isolation as Motif in 'A Painful Case.'" *James Joyce's Dubliners: A Critical Handbook*. Eds. James R. Baker and Thomas F. Staley. Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1969. 130-39.

Leech, Geoffrey & Mick Short, *Style in Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose*. 2nd ed. Pearson Education ESL, 2007.

Lowe-Evans, Mary. "Who Killed Mrs Sinico?" *Studies in Short Fiction* 32 (1995): 395-402.

Wales, Katie. *A Dictionary of Stylistics*. 3rd ed. Pearson Education ESL, 2011.

Walzl, Florence. "Dubliners." *A Companion to Joyce Studies*. Eds. Zack Bowen and James F. Carens. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1984.

West, Michael and William Hendricks. "The Genesis and Significance of Joyce's Irony in 'A Painful Case.'" *English Literary History* 44 (1977): 701-27.

Wright, David G. "The Secret Life of Leopold Bloom and Emily Sinico." *James Joyce Quarterly* 37. 1/2. (Fall 1999 / Winter 2000): 99-112.