JOYCE'S "A LITTLE CLOUD"

—The Case of the Would-Be Artist—

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Of the fifteen stories in Joyce's Dubliners "A Little Cloud" is one of the most melancholy stories with all the mockery of the melancholy presented by the protagonist, a would-be artist, being trapped in an insipid marriage situation, longing to escape from life to be a successful poet. It is a story which deserves to be scrutinized as a statement of Joyce's ideas regarding the spiritual paralysis of Dublin's literary societies; especially the living death of the intellectual life of Dublin. The paralysis "manifests itself in an inability to affirm one's own nature." The story is not only concerned with the paralysis, the main theme recurrent elsewhere in Dubliners, but also with the nature of a true artist and his role in the society. Some of Joyce's Thomistic aesthetic theories are already foreshadowed in this story and are fully developed in his later works, Stephen Hero and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. As James Ruoff has pointed out, "'A Little Cloud' suggests a great deal more than is framed" as a simple story about a shattered marriage of a pathetic would-be poet.

As in many stories of Dubliners "A Little Cloud" can also be divided into three separate but thematically related episodes. As the story begins in the first episode, Little Chandler, at his office in the King's Inn and in the streets of Dublin, reveals his mind and attitudes in his conflict with his ego; in the second episode the protagonist, at Corless's restaurant meets his friend, Ignatius Gallaher, reveals himself in his relation to and conflict with Gallaher, who may be interpreted as Little Chandler's alter ego; in the last episode at his home, Chandler reveals himself in his relation to and conflict with his wife and his child. In all of these three episodes Little Chandler’s character is genuinely sketched.

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in his yearning for becoming a poet, in his mind’s contest between admiration and envy of his friend, and in his shouting at his infant baby and being repelled by his cold and ladylike prettiness of his wife, that the whole thematic composition of the story comes to a clean manifestation.

The first episode of the story may well be again divided into two sections; in the opening section Little Chandler sitting at his desk in the King’s Inn thinks of re-meeting his old friend Gallaher and “his mind is full of a present joy”; in the second section Little Chandler, on his way to Corless’s where Gallaher is waiting for him, reveals himself that he is a dreamy character far from any dynamic personal activity. Several aspects of Little Chandler’s characters and his mental attitudes are remarkably well sketched. He is depicted as a man “slightly under the average statures... his frame was fragile, his voice was quiet and his manners was refined. He took the great care of his silken hair and moustache...” As he is excited in anticipating the reunion with his old friend, he gazes out of his office window at the scene of the streets and thinks of life. Then he becomes sad: “A gentle melancholy took possession of him. He felt how useless it was to struggle against fortune, this being the burden of wisdom which the ages had bequeathed to him.” Whenever he thinks of life he feels that he is trapped and shut off from life.

We can easily recognize that when he was young, Little Chandler was freely indulged in the Wordsworthian beauty and reality of poetry, but the indulgence has been hindered on account of his shyness to read poems to his wife ever since his marriage. But from time to time his romantic temper allows him to find some consolation in repeating the lines to himself.

As he quickens his pace towards Corless’s restaurant he feels “himself superior to the people he passed,” for he is to meet his friend who has succeeded in the London Press and he admires Gallaher who has “so many signs of future greatness,” and for the first time his soul revolts against the dull inelegance of the street he passes. He thinks: “if you wanted to succeed you had to go away. You could do nothing in Dublin.” The readers will readily find an example of Joyce’s condemnation of Dublin. For Dublin is the city of paralysis in which the creative mind is unable to affirm his own nature and his creative impulse withers. As James Ruoff has well pointed out, the artist’s leaving Dublin should not be the escape from life, but should rather be a voluntary exile to detach himself from it to enhance his creative mind. He says: