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**The Relationship between Paralysis and Short Story as a
Genre in James Joyce's *Dubliners*
(Meeting Joyce- my moment of revelation)**

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1. Introduction

In the history of humanity there has always been an urging need to quarrel with the past, to make something new and completely different. Artists, writers and philosophers¹ looked at tradition as a kind of retentiveness, which held their creative processes back, tucked them into ‘prefabricated’ frames, obstructing them in their free expression of feelings and emotions. Therefore they sought a way to delimitate themselves from the past and dedicate their writings and works of art to the present.

From the middle of the 19th to the middle of the 20th century an unprecedented social and technical development took place, being closely followed by a new tendency: Modernism. Although there was no artistic programme or a set of principles, the feeling that the old ways would not do anymore was obvious. Modernists too had to face an immense system of institutions, established facts and rules which came from pre-modern times. The only difference to previous centuries was a change in perspective: the different literary modes were no longer set on a strict ‘development-line’, but they existed alongside each other and influenced each other. So the artist’s aim was not necessarily to fight against tradition, but to transform it according to his/her needs. Thus Modernism operates with certain characteristics of realism², but goes beyond it in its construction and content. Modernist writers use already existing genres and literary conventions, but subject them to a more modern point of view. According to Malcolm Bradbury’s definition: “Modernist art is, in most critical usage, reckoned to be the art of what Harold Rosenberg calls ‘the tradition of the new.’ It is experimental, formally complex, elliptical, contains elements of decreation as well as creation, and tends to associate notions of the artist’s freedom from realism, materialism, traditional genre and form, with notions of cultural apocalypse and disaster . . .”(Childs, 2001, 2)

My goal being the study of the relationship between Modernism and the features of the short story, from the perspective of Joyce’s *Dubliners*, I do not wish to give a full perspective on Modernism, but to highlight those aspects, which I find the most relevant for my subject-matter.

¹ In literature Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* appeared as a parody to the genre of romance, in art Monet’s Impressionism was meant to break the strict rules of Realist painting. These are just two examples, but they illustrate the way in which popular tendencies become outdated in time and are replaced by new ones.

² The ‘scrupulous meanness’ of *Dubliners*, the explicitness and the destruction of illusions are the manifestations of Joyce’s realism.

2. The Modern Short Story

Modernism had a great influence on literature as well, and the genre of the “compressed, condensed, complex literature of the city, of industry and technology, war, machinery and speed” (Childs, 2001, 4), the short story was ‘re-invented’. Taking H.E. Bates’s definition as a starting point, I tried to determine what makes a short story modern. His triggering explanation goes on like this: “The short story can be anything from the death of a horse to a young girl’s first love affair, from the static sketch without plot to the swiftly moving machine of bold action and climax, from the prose poem, painted rather than written, to the piece of straight reportage in which style, colour and elaboration have no place...The short story has something of the indefinite and infinitively variable nature of a cloud.”(Black, 1960)

The definition itself is like a modern short story, it needs to be deciphered. I agree with Bates when he emphasizes the variety and flexibility of this genre, because the short story can indeed be shaped according to the writers preferences. Christopher Buttler explains in his essay, *Joyce the Modernist* (2006) that modernist artists move to freedom and confidence in stylistic experiment, therefore their works are also characterized by the same aspects. The usual formal conventions, the ‘dramatic’ structures (exposition, complication, rising action, crisis, climax, resolution and moral) are changed, transposed or left out. The gaps thus created have to be filled in by the reader, or at least have to incite the audience to decode the relationship between the stylistic medium and the message. Because of this the modern short stories can be called “self-generating, process texts” (Mihálycsa, 2008, 14). For better understanding I will exemplify this phenomenon with James Joyce’s three short stories.

3. James Joyce and the *Dubliners*

One of the greatest representatives of Modernism and one of the most outstanding “cultivators” of short story writing was James Joyce. Born near Dublin in 1882, James was the eldest son of John and Mary Jane Joyce. By the time he graduated from University College, Dublin in 1902 he had a strong conviction about his future career, becoming a writer. He left his homeland and spent the majority of his life abroad, taking Ireland with him in his plots, characters and style, which later developed into novels and short stories (Gray, 1998). He was not the only one who lived in a self-imposed exile. After the war, London was no longer a cultural centre so that many of his contemporaries chose to leave England and settle themselves

on the continent. If we look closer, we can see that most of the English literature of the period was in fact the literature of the 'exiles'. Even though he turned his back on customs and faith, Joyce never stopped being an Irishman. What makes him really remarkable is his innovative spirit, rebellion, the modernity of his style- including literary techniques like the stream of consciousness and epiphany, and the multitude of symbolic images, which stem from the Irish cultural background.

According to Paul Gray, James Joyce once told a friend, "One of the things I could never get accustomed to in my youth was the difference I found between life and literature." Therefore he dedicated his career to the objective and critical reflection of life in his literature, struggling with publishers, who found his work and the underlying message immoral and too direct for the readership. His first positive critique came from Ezra Pound, who helped him publish his first poems and several fictional works. The most famous of his writings are the *Dubliners* (1914), *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and *Ulysses* (1922).

The writing project that later became *Dubliners* started with George Russell's request: he asked Joyce to write something simple and rural for his agricultural journal *The Irish Homestead*. Joyce agreed, but stated right at the beginning, that he was unable of writing anything simple. He was aware, that his country needed to see its reflection in a mirror-like work, that would emphasize all the 'protuberances': the bilateral Irish nationalism, the domination of England on one side and that of Rome on the other side, the linguistic anxieties ('Irish-English') and provincialism as a disease. He justified his choice in the following fragment: "I do not think that any writer has yet presented Dublin to the world. It has been a capital of Europe for thousands of years, it is supposed to be the second city of the British Empire and it is nearly three times as big as Venice. Moreover, on account of many circumstances which I cannot detail here, the expression 'Dubliners' seems to me to have some meaning and I doubt whether the same can be said for such words as 'Londoner' and 'Parisian' both of which have been used by writers as titles (Joyce, 1905)."

Through the 15 short stories of the volume, Joyce gives the reader a full perspective on Dublin and as he himself explains: "I have tried to present it to the indifferent public under four of its aspects: childhood, adolescence, maturity and public life. The stories are arranged in this order (Joyce, 1906)." The instauration of paralysis is progressive: the children experience disillusion and limitation, the adolescents fail to escape, the mature characters are already

trapped in a routine and public life reveals that society is inert, customs and mentality never change; people are stuck in a state of immorality and have no intentions to get out of it. Religion, light and darkness, love and above all, death are the motifs that best describe paralysis.

In order to build up a relationship between paralysis and short story as a genre, we have to be fully aware of what paralysis means and of all the different means in which it manifests itself. That is why I chose to analyse three of the short stories, first from the point of view of their content, chain of thoughts, symbols and message, and to extend the analysis to the form, structure and conventions of the genre only afterward. In this way the methods of close reading will serve as methods for structural analysis as well.

4. “The Sisters”

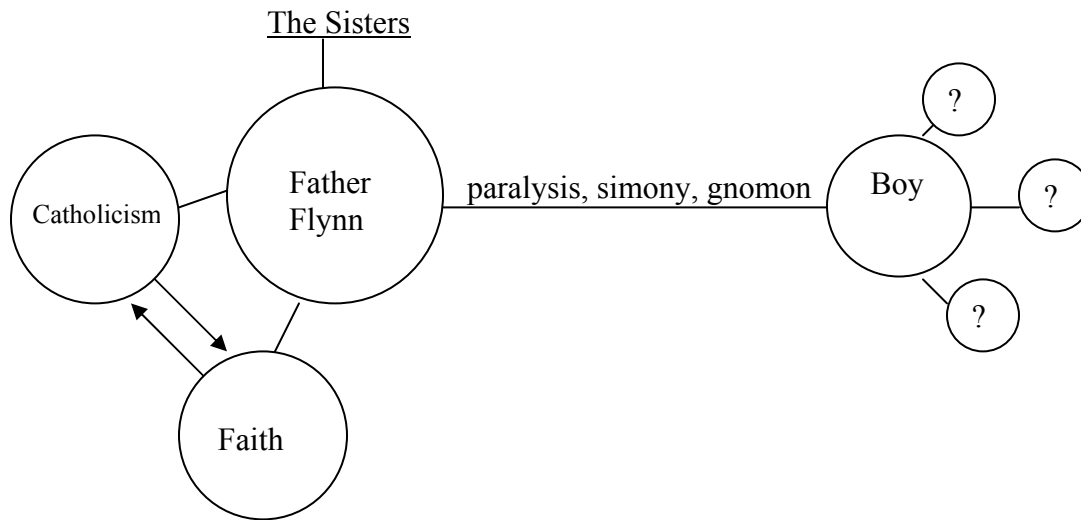
The first short story of the volume and the first childhood story as well is entitled “The Sisters”. Right from the beginning the narrator suggests the idea of repetition and monotony: „Night after night I had passed the house (...) and night after night I had found it lighted in the same way, faintly and evenly.” The turning point in the life of the main character (1st person, singular narrator at the same time) is represented by the death of father Flynn, an event by no means surprising or unexpected. In spite of this, the conception of paralysis, which can refer to the illness of the priest or to a general state of being, changes in the child’s mind. What was considered to be strange, „like the word gnomon in the Euclid and the word simony in the Catechism”, becomes a „maleficent and sinful being. It filled me with fear, and yet I longed to be nearer to it and to look upon its deadly work.” Visiting the house of mourning, the child assists at the conversation between his aunt and the priest’s sister, Eliza. The fact, that the dialogue is not incessant, contributes to the mystery surrounding the last months of the reverend. He seemed overwhelmed by his priestly duties and was acting strangely, presenting even some signs of madness. Symbolically, we can interpret the change in his behaviour as an act of breaking out of paralysis, letting go of all the things that kept him bound - amidst other things, even his faith and religion. His death represents the end of his struggles, the body he leaves behind is still paralyzed and grey, but if we consider the image of the confessing and continually smiling paralytic in the child’s dream retrospectively, we can draw the conclusion, that he gains spiritual freedom in the end.

This first short story is of striking relevance in the introduction of the theme: Dublin, as a space of paralysis. As Joyce suggests us through the perspective of a child, the first cause of the paralysis-like state is the doctrine of Irish Catholicism. Strict rules and regulations made people obedient; they were manipulated by the church in every possible field of life, not noticing the discrepancy between the Christian values and the actual reality: simony, sins and lies. Besides religion, conservatism was the dominant trait of 20th-century-Ireland, setting rigorous standards for people to rise up to. Non-conventional individuals, such as a priest giving up his faith and trying to fight against paralysis, or a novelist, like Joyce, criticizing his homeland, were considered trespassers.

From the structural point of view, the lack of an exposition strikes us right from the beginning. Using the so called *in medias res* technique (in the middle of the action), the writer does not give the reader time to prepare or to become absorbed in the atmosphere, he/she is faced with father Flynn's death. Furthermore the first paragraph is organized around three exceptional key words: paralysis, gnomon and simony, out which the second symbolizes a riddle or a geometrical form with a missing corner. The latter meaning can also influence the way we perceive the short story: that missing corner can be either the boy, who is trying to look for answers, or through him the reader, who is trying to give sense to the whole. The event that introduces the conflict is when the boy finds out of his old friend's death; he tries to cope with it, even though there are several aspects he does not understand, during the rise of action. The climax of this story, in my opinion is the dream of the boy, which he may not comprehend, but he is certainly aware of its importance. The resolution the reader waits for does not exist, or at least not at a textual level. The last sentence "there was something gone wrong with him..." is part of the open ended narrative and makes us create a resolution or a conclusion.

The story's length and the narrated period (1-2 days) are quite traditional, but we cannot say the same thing about the characters or the events narrated. Judging from the title, we would think that the sisters are the main characters of the story, but in fact they hardly appear and are very summarily characterized. The events seem unusual only for the outstanding person, but not for the provincial, who is used to the routine of birth, life, death. Joyce uses the stream of consciousness to reveal the psychical reactions and feelings of the characters, but he does not preach about their situation, he lets the reader decide and judge.

In short, the structure and the relationships between the characters at a micro textual level can be illustrated like this:



5. “Counterparts”

“Counterparts” is the 9th short story of the volume, which presents the idea of paralysis from a slightly different point of view. The introduction is extremely suggestive as far as the general atmosphere and the outcome of the plot is concerned: „The bell rang furiously...” The main character, Farrington, is a scrivener in Mr. Alleyne’s office, but from the beginning he seems unsatisfied with his assignments. Trying to ignore his employer’s demands, he experiences the ordeals of every alcoholic man: the urge to satisfy his need for a drink immediately, even if he doesn’t have the money for it: „A spasm of rage gripped his throat for a few moments and then passed, leaving after it a sharp sensation of thirst.”

Farrington is the archetype of that individual, who cannot deal with the problems of everyday life, and finds refuge in an addiction. Being the subject of others, he wants to exercise his authority on the least powerful people in his life: his family. „He had lost his reputation as a strong man, having been defeated twice by a mere boy. His heart swelled with fury and (...) nearly choked him.” In a revelation-like moment, the reader has to witness as Farrington, elated by the drinks he had, takes out his frustration on his son, Tom. The relationship between father and son is an indicator of the family hierarchy in Dublin at the beginning of the 20th century. Every member is somehow subordinated to the „head of the family”, the husband and father. This mentality is transferred from one generation to another, giving birth to the same monotony and routine that the reader has already experienced in “The Sisters”. The key words of this short

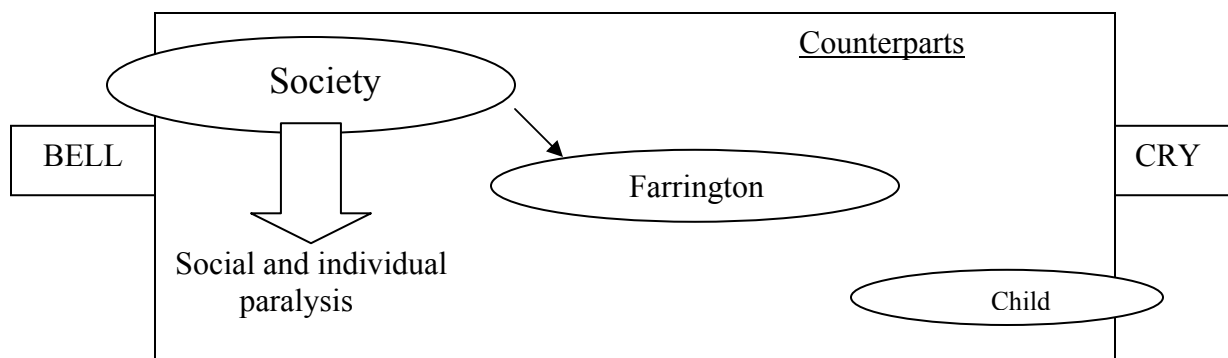
story are frustration and anger, both caused by social and individual paralysis and the incapacity to step out of it.

Structurally the story resembles the first one, it „begins in the middle of something and stops unexpectedly with what may or may not be a new beginning (Leonard, 2006).” The complication is caused by the lack of money and the fact, that Farrington is over and over reminded of his helplessness. This leads to the rising action: the man looks for an escape from the paralysis and finds it in the semi-consciousness of being drunk. The climax is the point, when Farrington, unable to prove his strength, heads home and beats his son for no reason. Yet again, Joyce doesn’t offer the reader a clear resolution, there is no way out of this state. The boy’s repeated cries („I’ll say a Hail Mary for you...”) resonate with the sound of the furiously ringing bells, thus offering the short story a frame. The period narrated is one day, which, considering paralysis and repetition, is enough for the understanding of this world.

The main character’s physical and psychical reactions are described more circumstantially, than usual (“He had a hanging face, dark winecoloured, with fair eyebrows and moustache: his eyes bulged forward slightly and the whites of them were dirty.”, “he continued to stare stupidly at the last words he had written...”) and in doing so, the writer gives the audience the chance to follow the whole process of manifestation of the inner conflict. Joyce also uses his favoured narrative technique, the ‘free indirect style’: the narrative takes on the language and sensibility of the person it is describing (Kelly, 1991), to emphasize traits like anonymity and inconsequentiality.

We can clearly feel the Modernism’s effect in the ‘re-evaluation of all values’(Butler, 2006) too: there is no happy family, no proud father and certainly no beloved son, the misery of life appears in its reality. Joyce himself said in one of his letters with a sceptical irony, that „My mind rejects the whole present social order and Christianity...” (Butler, 2006), which is understandable in a situation, where the Christian rules do not stop abuse and violence.

A scheme of this story’s structure and form would be this:



6. "The Dead"

The last short story of the volume carries the symbolic title "The Dead" and contains the greatest amount of symbols and motifs. The first (Lily) and the last word (dead) frame the plot, Lily making a reference to the white flower of innocence and to death at the same time. The main character is Gabriel Conroy, whose internal conflicts, humiliation and revelation are thoroughly analyzed by the narrator. He and his wife, Gretta arrive at a dinner party on the night of Epiphany and they are greeted by Gabriel's two, enthusiastic aunts. The characters represent typologies of different personalities: Gabriel, the naive intellectual, Gretta, the mysterious and exciting woman, Lily, the poor maid, Miss Kate and Miss Julia, two spinsters, Freddy Malin, the debauched alcoholic and Miss Ivors, a devoted nationalist. All the external conflicts stem from these personality-differences, but the one I would like to highlight is the argument between Gabriel and Miss Ivors. The theme of their conversation is Irish nationalism and its betrayal.

Irish nationalism was born at the end of the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th century. It manifested itself in both political and social life, pleading for self-government and independence (McConnel). „The contemporary 'literary revival' was an expression of cultural nationalism. The term refers to a group of poets, prose-writers and playwrights who for inspiration looked to Irish myths, folklore and popular culture. The main focus of the movement was to use Gaelic material as the basis for a revitalized Irish literature in English." (1916 Easter Rising- see bibliography)

The extreme nationalism can lead to another level of social and intellectual paralysis: the nationalists are so absorbed in their ideology, that they ignore the reality behind it. For an authentic manifestation certain amount of knowledge about the national idiosyncraticism is needed. Gabriel illustrates it perfectly, that when there is not enough foundation, nationalism loses its essence: „*And haven't you your own language to keep in touch with -- Irish?*" asked Miss Ivors. *Well*, said Gabriel, *if it comes to that, you know, Irish is not my language.*"

Emotional paralysis is at least as important as the social or intellectual one. Internal conflicts distort the human nature, making it irascible and enigmatic. The relationship between Gabriel and Gretta illustrates this idea perfectly. On one hand, there is an insecure man, who wants to adopt modernity and wants to reveal his intellectual side, but he does not have the chance for it. On the other hand there is Gretta, a devoted and caring wife, who supports her

husband in every possible way, even if, in conformity with the period's conventions, she is subordinated to him.

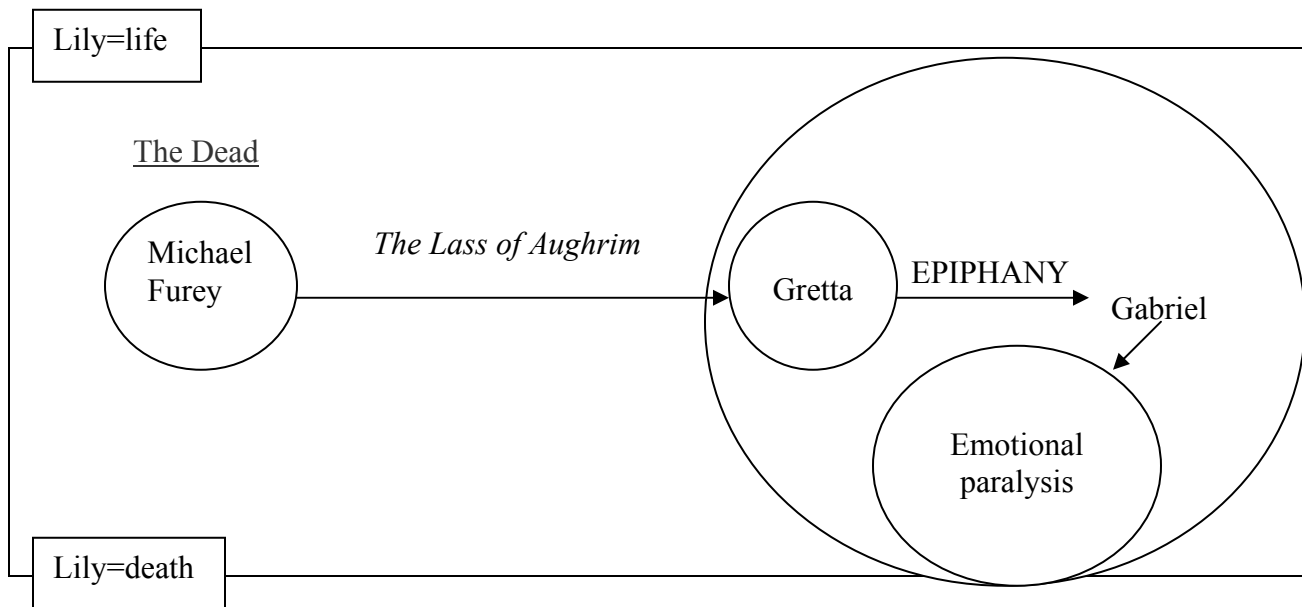
The turning point in their relationship is generated by the sudden realisation, that the picture they have made themselves about the other is misshapen. When the two prepare to leave the dinner party, Gabriel spots his wife standing on the top of the stairs and his heart fills with love and desire at her sight. Her reflection in Gabriel changes, the man rediscovers love, overshadowed by conventionalities, and the pathos of his sudden revelation³ makes him believe, that Gretta shares his feelings. In fact, Gretta is lost in her memories triggered by an Irish song, *The Lass of Aughrim*. She reveals her true feelings only in the hotel room, telling her husband about her long lost love, Michael Furey.

Thus, Gabriel experiences a second, more painful moment of revelation and his disappointment and sadness reach an even higher level, when he realises, that it is impossible to compete with a dead man. Michael Furey loved Gretta to such an extent, that he risked his life for her and died in the end. The young boy's sacrifice, purified by the noble feeling of love, means more than anything Gabriel could ever offer Gretta. When he had the lights in the room turned off, he thought, that his knowledge, his love, his "light" would be enough for both of them. When he is faced the truth, he turns to the outside-lights searching for an answer.

Fallen into an emotional paralysis, his whole person is fading away. The houses are covered with snow, and this pure whiteness can symbolically mean the end or on the contrary, a new beginning. The end of the short story refers back to the title, but also to *The Sisters*; the image of death gains importance through its resemblance to the state of paralysis: "His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead."

³ The moment of unexpected revelations, "sudden spiritual manifestations" in Joyce's own literary term is called **epiphany**. He uses this technique on purpose, giving his own definition in *Stephen Hero*: "First we recognise that the object is one integral thing, then we recognise that it is an organised composite structure, a thing in fact: finally, when the relation of the parts is exquisite, when the parts are adjusted to the special point, we recognise that it is that thing which it is. Its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance. The soul of the commonest object, the structure of which is so adjusted, seems to us radiant. The object achieves its epiphany." (1944) Moreover, Francesca Valente says, that: "*The Dead*, which is both the synthesis and the climax of *Dubliners*, is a single epiphany of multiple meaning..."

Structurally the story presents the following peculiarities:



7. The Relationship Paralysis-Short Story

Joyce transformed his trivial characters into archetypes and endowed every possible word with a symbolical meaning. All this was the matter of applying modernist techniques. But the infiltration of religion into the work of a man, who had long turned his back on faith and Christianity, was something else, something more than technique. According to John S. Kelly, Joyce thought of his writing process in religious terms (1991). He called the stories a ‘series of epicleti’⁴ and built the majority of them on epiphany, secularizing the religious terms.

I wanted to highlight these facts because I think that Joyce did everything on purpose; his choice of paralysis as the key motif of the collection was just another way to achieve a moral aim. Francesca Valente said in one of her essays: “If, as *Stephen Hero* says, the epiphany reveals the whatness of an object, then *Dubliners* is the revelation of an entire city's. Each story presents an unpalatable truth, and all these truths [social, intellectual, emotional] taken together reveal a general state of paralysis which, in Joyce's view, was the whatness of Dublin in his time.” Taking this into consideration, the short story as a genre must be in some kind of relationship with paralysis- only the type of this relation is hard to define. The short story is short, compact and

⁴ In the Greek Orthodox Church epicleti is an invocation to the Holy Ghost to transform the bread and the wine into the body and blood of Christ. Joyce was trying to give people and intellectual delight by emphasizing the significance of ‘everyday bread’, of trivial things. (Kelly, 1991)

with no space for exhausting details. The writers create a clear and hard prose, without the need to transform it into 'round' stories. Therefore when we read the text, we cannot find the absolute meaning, only bits of it, we cannot get the best answer to our questions, only hints to answer them ourselves, but most importantly there is no definite ending, only signs of a new beginning.

We can easily find ourselves in a never-ending circle of reading and trying to understand, which pretty much resembles paralysis. When the reader thinks he/she got the message of the story, another aspect, that went unobserved until then, draws the attention upon itself, and the whole interpretation disintegrates. As if the story would be playing⁵ hide-and-seek with the reader.

The ambiguity and plurality is not helping the interpretation either- in a world, where all the values have become emptied, 'dehumanized' it is hard to decide what is positive, what is negative. The inability to make a decision is also paralysis, a mental form of it. With the help of the many narrative techniques (stream of consciousness, free indirect speech etc.) the reader empathizes with the situation of the character and thus the character's emotional, social or even physical paralysis becomes his own.

There is however another issue, that we have to consider. Because we are talking about Joyce, we cannot stop the interpretation of the short story at the moment when we feel that we have become one with the character. The reader's reception has to pass over the state of paralysis and become a much deeper understanding through self-awareness. All this together with the epiphanies of the characters and the paralysis contribute to the existence of the static moments that are so characteristic to short prose in general.

7. Conclusion

Derek Attridge said, that one can never get bored of reading Joyce's texts, because they change, as our own cultural surroundings change, they are inexhaustible, we are just unable to "squeeze" his texts dry (Attridge, 2006). The most important thing of all is that we never stop re-interpreting literature. Even though I think I may have found the answer to my question: "Can the shortness and compactness of the form be also a marker of the paralysis?" I have to keep

⁵ According to Gadamer's way of interpreting literature, the process of reading is a play, which fulfills its purpose only if the player/reader loses himself in the play/text. We can often witness that the play uses its players and not vice versa. Playing renews itself in constant repetition and has no goal that would bring it to an end. This hermeneutic circle contributes to statics and resembles paralysis very much.

searching for a better one. The process of interpretation is often compared to vivisection: “The modern spirit is vivisective. Vivisection itself is the most modern process one can conceive. The ancient spirit accepted phenomena with a bad grace. The ancient method investigated law with the lantern of justice, morality with the lantern of revelation, art with the lantern of tradition. But all these lanterns have magical properties: they transform and disfigure. The modern method examines its territory by the light of day.” (Butler, 2006)

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