Grace

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JAMES JOYCE

James Joyce grew up in Rathgar, a suburb of Dublin, and studied at University College, where he began to publish literary reviews, poems, and plays. After college, he moved to Paris, where he briefly studied medicine. In 1903, just one year later, Joyce's mother got sick, and he moved back to Dublin to take care of her. After meeting his wife Nora Barnacle, a chambermaid from Galway, the couple left Dublin and lived in various European countries, including Yugoslavia and Italy. They later fled to Zurich during World War I. Joyce only returned to Dublin four times after moving away, but much of his writing remained heavily focused on the city or on Ireland more generally. Two years after publishing his first book, *Dubliners* (the short-story collection that includes "Grace"), Joyce received guidance from the poet Ezra Pound that helped him publish his first novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in 1916. These books brought Joyce some fame and a reputation as one of the foremost Modernist writers, which only increased after the publication of his highly experimental book *Ulysses* (1922), which was both hailed as a masterpiece and banned in numerous countries for indecency. Joyce continued writing after *Ulysses*, producing the even more avant-garde *Finnegans Wake* in 1939. Joyce was always a heavy drinker, and he died in 1941 from complications of surgery on a perforated ulcer.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Grace"—and all of the stories in *Dubliners*—takes place in the early 20th century, an important period in Irish history due to the rise of Irish nationalism. During this time, people increasingly refused to submit to England's colonial rule. The conflict led to a civil war within Ireland between those who wanted independence (nationalists or republicans) and those who wanted to stay part of the British Empire (loyalists). This political conflict also led to religious conflict, because most nationalists were Catholic (though the Church did not officially endorse their violent methods) while most loyalists were Protestant. This conflict is evident in "Grace," as Catholic characters like Jack Power, Martin Cunningham, and Mr. M'Coy denounce Protestantism and place a great deal of importance on the Catholic faith. The story also implies Joyce's own complicated concerns about the Catholic Church's role in Ireland.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"Grace" is one of 15 stories in Joyce's *Dubliners*, a collection about Dublin in the early 20th century. Several of the characters in *Dubliners* reappear in Joyce's groundbreaking novel *Ulysses*, including Tom Kernan, Martin Cunningham, and Mr. M'Coy. "Grace" is a story that centers on a Christian redemption narrative based on the biblical "fall of man" story, in which Adam and Eve (the first man and woman according to the Christian tradition) fell from innocence and obedience to sin and disobedience. The archetype of the "fall" is also portrayed in books like Dante's *Divine Comedy*, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, and John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Joyce's dialogue-heavy writing style in *Dubliners* went on to influence writers like Ernest Hemingway (*The Sun Also Rises*) and Cormac McCarthy (*All the Pretty Horses*), whose books tend to eschew direct exposition and instead rely on the subtext of dialogue between characters.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Grace
- **When Written:** 1905
- **Where Written:** Dublin
- **When Published:** 1914
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** Dublin, Ireland
- **Climax:** Father Purdon delivers his sermon at the religious retreat.
- **Antagonist:** Alcohol abuse; isolation
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Off the Wagon. "Grace" ends abruptly and ambiguously, leaving readers unsure of whether Tom Kernan will stay sober. But Joyce's later novel *Ulysses* features Kernan drinking gin in a bar, subtly implying that the mission Kernan's friends undertook in "Grace" has failed.

PLOT SUMMARY

Tom Kernan lies on the floor, unconscious and bleeding from the mouth, having drunkenly fallen down a flight of **stairs** in a pub. No one in the pub knows who Kernan is or where his drinking companions went. One bystander, a young man in a cycling-suit, manages to force brandy down Kernan's throat to wake him up. Then, a police constable arrives and tries to discern who Kernan is, but Kernan refuses to engage and

insists that he's fine. Suddenly, one of Kernan's close friends, Mr. Power, joins the crowd of onlookers, and he and the young man help Kernan into a cab.

Mr. Power joins Kernan on the cab ride home, and Kernan shows him that he bit off a piece of his tongue when he fell. Kernan is a once-successful traveling salesman who has experienced personal and professional decline, while the much-younger Mr. Power is rising up in life.

Upon arriving at the Kernans' house, Mrs. Kernan puts her husband to bed. Mr. Power explains to the angry Mrs. Kernan what happened, and that he himself wasn't involved—but Mrs. Kernan reassures him that she knows he's a good influence. Before leaving for the night, he assures Mrs. Kernan that he and Martin (another of Kernan's friends) will come over soon and help Kernan change his ways. As Mrs. Kernan watches Mr. Power leave in the cab, she reflects on how dissatisfying her and her husband's 25 years of marriage have been.

Two days after Kernan's fall, Jack Power arrives again at the Kernans' home, this time accompanied by two more of their friends, Martin Cunningham and Mr. M'Coy. Power has organized the friends to stage an intervention for Mr. Kernan by bringing him to a Catholic retreat where he can repent and start anew. Kernan was raised Protestant and only became a Catholic when he married Mrs. Kernan, but neither of the Kernans are particularly devout. While Kernan is skeptical about his friends' proposition, he doesn't outright refuse to go to the retreat.

As they wait to leave for the retreat, the four friends get into a long conversation about the history of the Catholic Church and Irish religion in particular, discussing everything from the influence of the Jesuit order, to the Protestant Orangemen, to the mottos of previous popes. Eventually, Fogarty (a grocer) arrives to deliver Kernan some whiskey, and he joins in the conversation as well. The men make many factual errors throughout this discussion. As the conversation comes to an end, Kernan seems more open to attending the retreat, and his friends remind him to bring a candle with him. Kernan, however, objects to the ritualistic use of **candles** in the Catholic service.

When Kernan, Power, Cunningham, M'Coy, and Fogarty arrive at the Gardiner Street Jesuit Church for the retreat, they recognize many of their acquaintances in the pews. Father Purdon, the priest, launches into a business-like sermon in which he describes religion in terms of credit accounts and calls himself their "spiritual accountant." The story ends during the sermon as Purdon encourages the congregants to balance their accounts.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Tom Kernan – Once a successful traveling salesman, middle-aged Tom Kernan has developed a binge drinking problem in recent years, which has led to a personal and professional decline. At the beginning of the story, Kernan has drunkenly fallen down the **staircase** in a pub, which symbolizes his more figurative fall from grace. When he returns home in his bloodied state, his wife, Mrs. Kernan, is upset—the Kernans don't have a particularly happy marriage, especially in light of Kernan's self-destructive habits. A couple of days later, Kernan's close friends—Jack Power, Martin Cunningham, and Mr. M'Coy—decide to intervene. Together, they conspire to take Kernan (who was raised Protestant and only begrudgingly became a nominal Catholic when he married his wife) to a Catholic retreat. They hope that this will help him become more devout and inspire him to reform his behavior. As his friends discuss the particulars of the Catholic Church and the divisions between Catholicism and Protestantism (though they get many details wrong), Kernan becomes more open-minded about religion. However, he almost refuses to participate in the retreat because he's so put off by the ritualistic nature of Catholicism—but he ultimately agrees to go. At the retreat, he listens to Father Purdon preach from raised pulpit—a position that's both literally and symbolically elevated compared to Kernan's fall to the bottom of the stairs—which implies that religion could indeed offer Kernan the salvation he's looking for. But Father Purdon's sermon turns out to be lackluster and businesslike, and the story ends before the reader knows what effect it has on Kernan. In the end, then, Kernan's character represents the idea that self-improvement is always possible if one is open to it—but his mixed feelings about religion (combined with Purdon's disappointing sermon) hints that Catholicism may not be the only path to redemption.

Jack Power – Power is one of Tom Kernan's closest friends; he's employed in the Royal Irish Constabulary Office in Dublin Castle. After Kernan drunkenly falls in the pub and is about to be arrested by a constable, Power emerges from the back of the pub and offers (along with the man in the cycling-suit) to take Kernan home. After helping Kernan into his home and promising to Mrs. Kernan to help him "turn over a new leaf," Kernan is appalled by the lower-class accents of the Kernan children and resolves to bring the household back to its former reputation. Power then rallies his friends Martin Cunningham and Mr. M'Coy to help him bring Kernan to a Catholic retreat in the hopes that he will reform his behavior and be redeemed. Power is largely the ringleader of the friend group and he steers their conversation throughout the story, as the four men discuss details of the Catholic faith in Ireland (many of which they get wrong). Ultimately, Power's quest to get Kernan to the retreat is successful; the story ends with the four men in the Jesuit Church. Power is the director of the action in "Grace"; the retreat is his idea, and it is he who sets Kernan on the possible, though by no means assured, path to redemption.

Martin Cunningham – Cunningham is the eldest and most esteemed of the story's main friend group (consisting of himself, Jack Power, M'Coy, and Tom Kernan). While Jack Power proposes the plan to bring Kernan to a Catholic retreat to remedy his binge-drinking problem, Cunningham takes the lead from him for two reasons: first, he is seen as the most "influential and intelligent" of the men (his friends even believe that he looks like Shakespeare). Second, he himself is married to "an incurable drunkard" who has pawned off their furniture repeatedly, so he has firsthand knowledge of the effects that a drinking problem can have on a household. As the four men sit in Kernan's house discussing the upcoming retreat, Cunningham acts as the authority during the ensuing conversation: whether the topic is the history of the Jesuit Order or various papal mottos, Cunningham answers definitely and inspires the other men. However, he is frequently incorrect, mistaking small historical details or mixing up the languages of the papal mottos. Cunningham exemplifies the hypocrisy of those who make a big deal of their religious devotion yet lack any actual moral superiority to those who are less devout.

Mr. M'Coy – Mr. M'Coy is one of the four men—in addition to Jack Power, Martin Cunningham, and Tom Kernan—who make up the main friend group in the story. Power and Cunningham enlist him to help convince Kernan to attend a Catholic retreat aimed at bringing him out of his downward spiral. M'Coy was once a semi-famous singer along with his wife, but he's since had trouble holding down a job, bouncing between a clerkship for a railroad company, an advertising sales job, and a private inquiry agent job, before becoming secretary to the City Coroner. He has also engaged in some less legitimate ways of making money, such as pawning off old suitcases "borrowed" from friends such as Power—something that leads to resentment between Power and himself. He joins in the long discussion about Catholic history and Irish religion that takes up the majority of the story, asking questions and stating facts (usually incorrect) in turn. Among his friends, M'Coy occupies a lower station than Power and Cunningham, but he's more successful than the troubled Kernan.

Mrs. Kernan – Mrs. Kernan has been married to Tom Kernan for 25 years, and they have five children together. She is a lifelong Catholic and remains faithful, though she also believes in some pagan elements of Irish folklore, such as the banshee. It's implied that she remains a Catholic largely because she was raised in the religion, rather than because of any deep faith she holds. Three weeks after she married her husband, Mrs. Kernan grew deeply unhappy with their marriage. Though she hoped that having children would help in that regard, she remains dissatisfied with her marriage and life. Part of that unhappiness comes from her husband's refusal to address his binge-drinking problem and how it has negatively impacted their life. Mrs. Kernan has tried repeatedly to break her husband's drinking habit by being strict and even sometimes unforgiving with him, but she has had little success. When her husband's friends Jack Power, Martin Cunningham, and Mr. M'Coy conspire to bring Kernan to a Catholic retreat in the hopes that he will reform his behavior, she is supportive of the endeavor since she believes the men to be strong in their religious devotion and committed to Kernan's well-being. Mrs. Kernan's character serves to challenge her husband's less-savory impulses, though her role in the story (much like her role as Kernan's wife) is mostly passive: she only appears when she's helping a drunken Kernan to bed or greeting guests and serving them drinks.

Father Purdon – Father Purdon is the priest at a Catholic retreat that Kernan attends with his friends Power, Cunningham, and M'Coy in the hope that he will find redemption from his heavy drinking and general misdeeds in life. Purdon is very business-like and transactional, comparing sin and redemption to debt and credit, respectively, and calling himself the "spiritual accountant" of his congregants. In his sermon, there is none of the spirituality and professions of faith that one might expect from a priest. Furthermore, his name is a subtle pun that reveals author James Joyce's distrust of the Catholic Church: "Purdon" was also the name of Dublin's prostitution district undermines his credibility as a religious authority figure and more generally associates his focus on the transactional nature of religion with the similarly transactional realm of prostitution.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mr. Fogarty – Mr. Fogarty, a grocer, is a friend of Mr. Kernan's. He arrives at Kernan's house toward the end of a long discussion between Kernan, Jack Power, Martin Cunningham, and Mr. M'Coy. After presenting Kernan with a bottle of whiskey as a gift, he joins in the men's conversation.

Young Man in a Cycling-Suit – The young man, who's wearing a cycling-suit, is a stranger who helps Kernan regain consciousness and get into a cab after his drunken fall down the **stairs** at the pub.

Constable – The constable is a police officer who arrives at the scene of Kernan's accident at the pub. He takes a statement from the pub manager and asks Kernan for his information, but Kernan doesn't cooperate.

Manager – The manager of the pub calls the police after Kernan's fall down the **stairs** and gives the constable a statement about the accident.

Bartender – The bartender is one of three men at the pub who help Kernan back up the **stairs** after he falls.

TERMS

The Jesuit Order – The Jesuit order, also known as the Society of Jesus, is a branch of Catholicism founded by St. Ignatius of Loyola in 1534. The Jesuits are known for their missionary work (they were instrumental in the spread of Christianity across South America) and their high level of education. In "Grace," **Mr. Power**, **Mr. Cunningham**, and **Mr. M'Coy** hold the Jesuit order in high esteem (although they get much of the Jesuit order's history wrong), and they take **Kernan** to a Jesuit church for a religious retreat.

Orangemen – The "Orangemen" or "the Orange Order" is a Protestant organization in Ireland that seeks to celebrate Protestant and British heritage. They are called "Orangemen" after William of Orange, the British Protestant king who replaced the Catholic James II in what was known as the Glorious Revolution in 1688-1689. The Orangemen are known for their annual July 12 marches throughout Ireland, which often turn into violent affairs used as intimidation against the Irish Catholic population, highlighting the religious strife that played a significant role in Irish society.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

MORALITY, REDEMPTION, AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

"Grace" begins with Tom Kernan bleeding at the bottom of a **staircase** in a bar, having fallen down it during his latest drinking binge. Following this event, three of Mr. Kernan's friends come together to stage an intervention for him, arranging for the four of them to attend a Catholic retreat where Kernan can make a fresh start. It's understandable that they would assume the Catholic Church is the answer to Kernan's problems: in early 20th-century Dublin, where the story is set, Catholicism was the dominant belief system and was widely regarded as the moral framework of Irish society. But although the reader may initially expect that Kernan will be redeemed by becoming a more devout Catholic, the story undermines the moral authority of Catholicism, thus forcing the reader to question whether embracing Catholicism would be an improvement to Kernan's life at all. In doing so, the story casts doubt onto the Irish Catholic Church and suggests that following its tenets may not be a surefire path to redeeming oneself or living a moral life.

Initially, it seems like "Grace" will be an archetypal Christian redemption story, in which Kernan will be saved from his alcohol abuse by embracing Catholicism. The story deliberately invokes the Christian trope of humanity's "fall" from innocence and eventual redemption through Jesus Christ. In the Bible, Adam and Eve bring original sin upon all of humanity when they eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge against God's prohibition, prompting God to throw them out of the Garden of Eden (paradise). This "fall" is eventually redeemed by Christ dying for humankind's sins. The "fall" part of this trope is presented quite literally in the story: it opens with Kernan having fallen down and injured himself because he drank too much. And indeed, Kernan has recently experienced a figurative "fall from grace" as well: the reader later learns that Kernan has developed a drinking problem and has begun to falter in his once-successful career. Here, his moral descent into self-destructive behavior is reflected by his physical descent down in the stairs. In the aftermath of this incident, Kernan's close friends Martin Cunningham, Jack Power, and Mr. M'Coy stage an intervention for Kernan, believing that taking him to a Catholic retreat will inspire him to be more devout and consequently save him from his own-self-destructive behavior. They hope that a traditional Christian (and specifically Catholic) redemption journey is what will save Kernan: if he devotes himself to Christ, he can atone for his mistakes and redeem himself in the eyes of God.

However, Kernan's Catholic friends and family are not particularly good Catholics themselves, which implies that the Church isn't free of hypocrisy or arrogance—and its practitioners shouldn't necessarily be seen as the moral authority over non-believers. Martin, Power, and M'Coy make a big show of their knowledge about the Church to impress one another and convince Kernan to accompany them to the retreat. However, they get most of the facts wrong: they incorrectly cite the history of the Jesuits, for instance, and they make up nonsensical papal mottoes. By presenting these foolish men as the model churchgoers for Kernan to follow, the story questions whether they have any moral authority over the down-on-his-luck Kernan, and whether Catholicism can truly save Kernan from himself. Mr. Kernan's wife, Mrs. Kernan, is also a lifelong Catholic—in fact, Mr. Kernan converted in order to marry her. But Mrs. Kernan also believes in "the banshee," a fairy-like creature from Irish folklore whose wails predict the death of a loved one. By believing in the banshee, Mrs. Kernan is committing the cardinal sin of idolatry, or having faith in a pagan creature. Even as the Catholic authority in the Kernan household, Mrs. Kernan is a sinner, which complicates Kernan's friends' conviction that the Catholic Church is a surefire path to a moral life.

At the Catholic retreat that Kernan and his friends attend, the priest (and the sermon he gives) are further indicators that the Church may not be the moral institution in claims to be. The primary target of satire in "Grace" is not churchgoers—it is the

Catholic Church itself. The main priest in the story is named Father Purdon, which is a reference to Purdon Street, where Dublin's red-light (prostitution) district was located at the time the story is set. This sly double-meaning of the priest's name suggests that Father Purdon is far from the moral authority that Kernan needs to guide him toward redemption. "Purdon" can also be read as a bungled version of the word "pardon," which is the term for a priest's absolution of a congregant's sins. This play on words calls into question the priest's ability to pardon Kernan of his sins, since his name is a botched version of that critical role. Purdon's sermon itself also signals that he's perhaps untrustworthy or immoral, as it features little of the spirituality that one might expect from a religious speech. Rather, Purdon leans heavily on soulless business metaphors, calling himself the "spiritual accountant" for the retreat attendees and stating that "Jesus Christ was not a hard taskmaster"—a strangely blunt choice of words to describe the central figure of Christianity. The priest's metaphors present the Catholic Church as a bank where one "deposits" sin and "withdraws" redemption, rather than a place of spiritual growth and care. This transactional banking metaphor further suggests that the Catholic Church is a hypocritical institution: instead of actually making devotees into better people, the Church just facilitates a shallow, unthinking exchange of sin for redemption.

Although Kernan's friends are hopeful that bringing Kernan to this retreat will help him better himself and recover from alcohol abuse, the story ends mid-sermon, before readers get to see whether or not this actually happens. And because "Grace" presents the Catholic Church in such condemnatory terms—making it out to be a largely hypocritical and arrogant institution—the reader is left wondering if becoming a strict Catholic wouldn't do more harm than good for Kernan. In doing so, the story takes a provocative stand against the unquestioned dominance of Catholicism in Irish society at the beginning of the 20th century.

CATHOLICISM VS. PROTESTANTISM

Religion heavily underpins the characters' motivations in "Grace"—in order to save their friend Tom Kernan from spiraling into alcohol abuse, Jack Power, Martin Cunningham, and Mr. M'Coy decide to take him to a church retreat where he will hopefully find God and reform his ways. However, Christianity in "Grace" is strictly divided into two strains of belief: Catholicism and Protestantism. On a broader scale, the opposition between these two belief systems has brought about centuries of sociopolitical conflict and war in Europe—and this rift in particular created a significant social division in 20th-century Ireland, where the story is set. In "Grace," however, the Catholic versus Protestant struggle isn't one rooted in deeply held tradition and intractable belief—rather, it's a superficial conflict between two groups that the story suggests have more in common than they tend to acknowledge.

The main characters in the story are all Catholics—though with differing degrees of faithfulness and belief—which speaks to the prevalence and cultural importance of Catholicism in Irish society. Kernan was born in a family of "Protestant stock" and is "fond […] of giving side-thrusts at Catholicism." However, he converted to Catholicism when he got married (presumably so that his wife, Mrs. Kernan, could get married in a Catholic church). Even though he isn't particularly devout, then, Catholicism remains important to him in a social and cultural context as an Irishman. Although Mrs. Kernan is a serious enough Catholic to have her husband convert, she is not the purest of Catholics—"religion for her [is] a habit." She also believes in elements of Irish paganism like the banshee (a folkloric figure), which are in direct conflict with the Catholic faith. However, Mrs. Kernan is still a devout Catholic in many ways, since she "believe[s] steadily in the Sacred Heart" (a specifically Catholic devotion) and "approve[s] of the sacraments." The other main characters in the story—Kernan's friends Power, Cunningham, and M'Coy—are all clearly Catholic as well, given that they hope to save Kernan through bringing him to a Catholic retreat. They also spend most of the story trying to impress one another with their knowledge of Catholic history and theology, demonstrating their desire to prove that they're sufficiently devout. Catholicism, then, is central to the characters in "Grace"—and, by implication, to Irish society more broadly.

However, a crucial way that the Catholic characters establish themselves as such is by denouncing Protestantism—in other words, their Catholicism is rooted not so much in *Catholic* belief, but rather in *anti-Protestant* belief. One of the main topics of conversation in the story revolves around Father Tom Burke, a 19th-century Catholic priest who was popular for his bombastic style but didn't preach accurate Catholic theology. Burke was so popular, in fact, that Power says there used to be "crowds of Protestants in the chapel when Father Tom was preaching." Although the men initially discuss Burke with admiration, after Power mentions the presence of Protestants in his sermon, the discussion quickly turns sour as Cunningham asserts that "our religion is *the* religion, the old, original faith," implying that Protestantism is merely a poor imitation. Amid the discussion about Burke, M'Coy tries to find some common ground between Catholics and Protestants—but he's hardly able to, stating, "we both believe in…the Redeemer. Only they don't believe in the Pope and in the mother of God." The ellipsis (…) here implies hesitance in M'Coy's speech as he struggles to come up with a similarity. He does eventually come up with something, which is that both groups believe in Christ the Redeemer—not a particularly meaningful overlap, since belief in Christ is the definition of Christianity. He is ultimately unable to reconcile the two, however, concluding by emphasizing differences in their belief (that Catholics follow the Pope and

place more emphasis on the Virgin Mary's role).

In fact, the Catholic men in the story get so bogged down in trying to differentiate themselves from Protestants that they lose track of the underlying scripture and principles of their faith (namely, devotion to Christ). Much of the conversation between the four men revolves around two Catholic institutions: the Order of the Jesuits and the papacy. The men make frequent mistakes in this discussion as they try to show off their Catholic knowledge—and in obsessing over these minutiae of Catholic history and theology, they essentially miss the forest for the trees. There is little discussion of the fundamental Christian tenets of salvation and redemption that are most relevant to helping Kernan, which is their primary goal in speaking with him and taking him to the retreat. Later, as the friends prepare to go to the retreat, Mr. M'Coy mentions that they need to bring candles with them in order to participate in the Catholic ritual. Kernan balks, declaring, "No, damn it all, I bar the candles! [...] I bar the magic-lantern business." For Kernan, candles symbolize the elements of Catholic worship that are more mystical than Protestant worship—and he almost doesn't attend the ritual because of this superficial difference in ceremony, meaning that his close-mindedness about Catholicism nearly causes him to miss out entirely on what the retreat might have to offer. With this, the story suggests that perhaps ceremonial or ritualistic differences between Catholicism and Protestantism are what divide them more so than the underlying scripture and principles of Christian faith.

The idea that Catholicism and Protestantism are more alike than they are different carries profound political and social implications when one takes into account the history of Christianity in Ireland. Ireland is a predominantly Catholic country, but following centuries of English colonialism, many Irish intellectual elites were Anglican Protestants. For that reason, religion is particularly tied to politics and class in Ireland, and in the early 20th century (at the time James Joyce was writing "Grace"), Ireland was moving toward a predominantly Catholic nationalist uprising against the Anglo-Protestant ruling class. Thus, in downplaying the differences between Catholicism and Protestantism, the story makes a profound statement in favor of reconciliation and peace in Joyce's home country.

COMMUNITY, ISOLATION, AND GENDER

"Grace" begins with Tom Kernan lying bloodied and alone at the bottom of a flight of **stairs**, having fallen down them during a bout of heavy drinking. Eventually, a kind stranger in a cycling-suit comes to his rescue and helps bring him home, along with Kernan's friend Jack Power. Beginning from this initial rescue, the story emphasizes the importance of community to support individuals and their particular struggles. However, Mrs. Kernan's character also draws attention to how communal support often falls along gender lines and does not actually encompass *everyone* in a community.

Mr. Kernan's binge-drinking sets up how struggling in isolation isn't just lonely—it can be downright dangerous. It is heavily implied that Kernan's drunken fall at the beginning of the story happens because he is alone. When the bar manager asks who he is and if he was alone, a bartender answers that he was with "two gentlemen" who seem to have disappeared and abandoned Kernan. Later in the story, once Kernan is with his friends, they, too, ask him what happened to the men who accompanied him to the bar—to which Kernan can only respond, "I wonder where he did go to." After Kernan's accident, a constable enters to investigate the property damage incurred by Kernan's fall. The only reason why Kernan escapes arrest is because a stranger (the young man in the cycling-suit) offers to help him home—and Power, whom they happen to run into on the way, helps as well. This implies that it is only through the care of his community that Kernan is able to make it home safely and evade jail.

As the story progresses, it becomes even clearer that struggling individuals like Kernan need a community to support them. Most of "Grace" is written in dialogue form—as Kernan, Power, Martin Cunningham, and Mr. M'Coy speak, the men's voices overlap and respond to one another. The free-flowing dialogue in the story brings the reader into this community of men, making the reader feel included and understand the value of that inclusion and support for Kernan. Following Kernan's drunken fall, his friends eventually conspire to bring him to a Catholic retreat (with the goal of helping him become a better Catholic and reform his behavior)—and the fact that the men are going as a group rather than sending Kernan alone makes it clear that they want to support him in his self-improvement journey. The retreat itself is also communal in nature: in the church, Kernan only begins to feel comfortable and supported once he realizes how many individuals he recognizes in the pews. It is the community-oriented aspect of worship that carries value for him, not the spiritual side.

However, Kernan's social circle is highly gendered—only men are included in it, and Kernan's wife, Mrs. Kernan, is the antithesis of this community. The communal scenes in the story consist entirely of men, who seem to intentionally separate themselves from women and converse only amongst themselves. Moreover, the men never mention a single woman in their long conversation that takes up most of the story, further emphasizing the lack of female representation in their spaces and conversations. Mrs. Kernan functions as the antithesis of Kernan's all-male community: she finds her life as a wife and mother "unbearable" and is "bounded by her kitchen" for much of life. Furthermore, her own attempts to pull Kernan out of his drinking problem are presented as comically annoying, harsh, and unsuccessful. For instance, when Mrs. Kernan comes into the living room to offer drinks to Kernan's

friends, he asks her, "And have you nothing for me, duckie?," to which she shoot back "O, you! The back of my hand to you!" To this, Kernan sarcastically replies "Nothing for poor little hubby!" Kernan's sharp response indicates that he doesn't take his wife's refusal to contribute to his alcohol consumption seriously—in fact, given Mrs. Kernan's dissatisfaction with her marriage, it doesn't seem like Kernan takes her seriously in any context. Mrs. Kernan's alienation from Kernan and the other men speaks to the role of gender in community spaces: the community of men supporting Kernan saves him from the dangers of isolation, but is also itself exclusionary, given the story's lack of women in the story and its negative portrayal of Mrs. Kernan and her unhappiness.

Kernan is relatively successful at improving his outlook on life, despite his fall from grace professionally and his descent into alcohol abuse, but Mrs. Kernan remains seemingly alone by the end of the story. In this way, Kernan and his wife offer contrasting examples of the negative effects of isolation. But while Kernan is able to benefit from community support from his male friends, Mrs. Kernan does not appear to have an equivalent female friend group and so continues to find her "wife's life irksome" and "unbearable." Through these parallel examples, the story underscores the importance of close friendships and communities—but also how these support systems can be exclusionary, particularly on the basis of gender.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

STAIRS AND PULPIT

The stairs that Mr. Kernan literally falls down at the beginning of the story symbolize a more figurative fall from grace, while the raised pulpit that he watches Father Purdon preach from at the end of the story represents the potential for redemption. "Grace" begins with Kernan lying unconscious and bleeding, having drunkenly fallen down the stairs in a Dublin pub. The bottom of the steps symbolizes what is often called "rock bottom" in addiction or other personal issues: the fall represents the worst of Kernan's binge-drinking problem, but also the potential for hope. He can literally fall no further, just as his reputation and professional standing have figuratively fallen.

Following Kernan hitting "rock bottom," as symbolized by the bottom of the stairs, three of his close friends—Jack Power, Martin Cunningham, Mr. M'Coy—enact a plan to take him to a Catholic retreat in order to redeem him through religion. After a long discussion, they eventually convince Kernan to go. Once they arrive at the Church, they listen to a sermon given by Father Purdon, the priest of the church. Purdon gives his speech from an elevated pulpit where he looks out over the congregation, and this position is a symbolic contrast to the bottom of the stairs where Kernan begins the story. The pulpit thus represents the promise of redemption and salvation, by which one can eventually reach heaven in the Christian belief system. The story complicates this symbolic meaning by making the sermon that Father Purdon delivers from the pulpit trite and shallow, rather than spiritual and meaningful, but if Father Purdon himself implies that the Irish Catholic Church might not offer the proper means to attain redemption, that doesn't diminish the pulpit's significance as a symbol of the possibility of such redemption.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *Dubliners* published in 1993.

Grace Quotes

❝ Two gentleman who were in the lavatory at the time tried to lift him up: but he was quite helpless. He lay curled up at the foot of the stairs down which he had fallen.... His hat had rolled a few yards away and his clothes were smeared with the filth and ooze of the floor on which he had lain, face downwards.

Related Characters: Tom Kernan

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 149

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs at the very beginning of the story, while Tom Kernan lies bloodied, dirty, and drunk after having fallen down a flight of stairs in a bar in Dublin. Two unnamed men step in to help him up, but he is too disoriented to move.

The story begins *in medias res*, meaning that the reader enters right into the middle of the action without any explanation or preamble. In this case, the jarring beginning imitates the sudden shock of Kernan's fall down the stairs. No names are given in the scene: it seems these three men do not know each other, and the reader wonders why the man was left alone in his drunken state. In this way, themes of isolation and anonymity begin to emerge within the story's first few sentences.

Words like "filth" and "ooze" spare no detail in describing the

dirt and grime in which Kernan lies. It is clear that this character is in dire straits, lying there with his face directly on the mucky floor. On a subtler note, the reader finds out a few pages later that Kernan takes great pride in his clothing and wears expensive, old-fashioned garments; it's another sign, then, of his deterioration that he lets those clothes get "smeared" with the foul matter of the bar floor.

As the story progresses and Kernan's friends attempt to set him up on a path of redemption by bringing him to a Catholic church retreat, this moment that encapsulates Kernan's physical and moral failings also becomes a clear Biblical reference. Kernan's literal fall down the steps is connected to the "fall" of Adam and Eve that led to their expulsion from the Garden of Eden, which in turn establishes the need for Kernan to find redemption (just as "fallen" mankind was redeemed, according to Christian theology, by Christ).

❝ Mr Power, a much younger man, was employed in the Royal Irish Constabulary Office in Dublin Castle. The arc of his social rise intersected the arc of his friend's decline but Mr Kernan's decline was mitigated by the fact that certain of those friends who had known him at his highest point of success still esteemed him as a character.

Related Characters: Tom Kernan, Jack Power

Related Themes:

Page Number: 153

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the reader learns more about the character Jack Power, who has rescued Mr. Kernan from his drunken misdemeanors and potential imprisonment. It becomes evident that Power's professional successes are directly inverse to Kernan's professional decline, but that Kernan's *former* success means that he still maintains the respect of his friends. At the same time, because Power is significantly younger than Kernan, the extent of Kernan's fall becomes clear: though he has had less time with which to build his career, Power has already overtaken Kernan.

This passage also testifies to the importance of friendship and community throughout the story. Even though Kernan has fallen on hard times, the severity of his descent is made more tolerable because some of his friends stuck by him. As the story progresses and these friends come to Kernan's aid, encouraging him to attend a retreat and get on the path of redemption, the importance of faithful friendship as introduced in this passage arises as a crucial theme of the story.

Related Characters: Jack Power (speaker), Martin Cunningham, Tom Kernan, Mrs. Kernan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 154

Explanation and Analysis

With this statement, Jack Power declares his intent to intervene in the professional and social descent of his friend Mr. Kernan. He assures Kernan's wife, Mrs. Kernan, that he and another friend, Martin Cunningham, will put Kernan on the path of redemption. In intervening so purposefully in Kernan's life and incorporating other friends in that intervention, Power demonstrates his unwavering commitment to his friendship and the way that communities of friends can support each other. He also makes it clear that that commitment is unconditional: even though Kernan's status in Dublin society has significantly fallen, Power puts his time and resources behind aiding his friend.

This quotation is particularly significant as well because it introduces the major plotline of the story: the efforts of Kernan's friends to convince him to join them on a religious retreat to confess their sins, renew their faith, and emerge better men—in other words, an effort to turn Kernan's life around through religion, an effort to redeem him. The reader also begins to ascertain some of the dynamics between the friends in this group: while Power is the ringleader, the one who sets the plan into motion, Martin Cunningham appears to be the preeminent authority who will oversee the effort.

❝ She believed steadily in the Sacred Heart as the most generally useful of all Catholic devotions and approved of the sacraments. Her faith was bounded by the kitchen but, if she was put to it, she could believe also in the banshee and in the Holy Ghost.

Related Characters: Mrs. Kernan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 157

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes the religious convictions of Mrs. Kernan, wife of the protagonist Mr. Kernan. Mrs. Kernan is a lifelong Catholic—in fact, Mr. Kernan converted from Protestantism in order to marry her. Mrs. Kernan is still a devout Catholic in many ways, since she "believed steadily in the Sacred Heart" (a specifically Catholic devotion) and "approved of the sacraments." But she also believes in "the banshee," a fairy-like creature from Irish folklore whose wails were said to predict the death of a loved one. By believing in the banshee, Mrs. Kernan is committing the cardinal sin of idolatry, or having faith in a pagan creature.

Thus, even as the Catholic authority in the Kernan household, Mrs. Kernan is a sinner, which begins the story's increasingly insistent portrayal of Irish Catholic churchgoers as being not-all-that religiously knowledgeable or perfectly pious. Rather, the story here implies that Irish Catholic belief is in some ways more cultural than strictly religious, that (for Mrs. Kernan, at least) it is perhaps merely a "useful" way to approach life and struggle.

The phrase "bounded by the kitchen" is also important in the way that it efficiently describes Mrs. Kernan's life. Tom Kernan may have fallen on hard times, but he still has friends and he still goes out to bars. Mrs. Kernan, in contrast, is stuck in her domestic role, "bounded by the kitchen." The story does not focus on Mrs. Kernan, but it portrays her solitude as being even more devasting and inescapable than her husband's.

> --Yes, that's it, said Mr Cunningham, Jack and I and M'Coy here – we're all going to wash the pot.

Related Characters: Martin Cunningham (speaker), Tom Kernan, Mr. M'Coy, Jack Power

Related Themes:

Page Number: 162

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Mr. Cunningham makes the first direct reference to the retreat he, Power, and M'Coy intend to use to set Kernan back on the right track, where they will all confess their sins and start anew. The metaphor that Cunningham uses to describe confessing one's sins—to wash the pot—is an unusual one, likely derived from Dublin slang. By using this specific metaphor, Cunningham likens sin and misdoings to remnants of food that must be disposed of—washed away—if the soul is to be "clean."

The metaphor also draws on imagery of everyday work and labor: rather than going immediately to religious language, which can be intimidating, Cunningham frames the retreat as a commonplace activity like washing the dishes. In doing so, he attempts to make it approachable to Kernan. That he feels he must make it approachable implies that he expects some resistance on his friend's part. Moreover, Cunningham announces their intended confession very casually and does not immediately invite Kernan to it. Rather, he presents it as a group outing and obscures the serious implications it actually carries in regard to Kernan's drinking and social descent. It is clear that Cunningham knows his friend well, and anticipates his potential resistance, but remains committed to his well-being. By uniting on their friend's behalf, Cunningham, Power, and M'Coy embody the kind of supportive community that the story suggests struggling individuals like Kernan rely on.

> Every other order of the Church has to be reformed at some time or other but the Jesuit Order was never once reformed. It never fell away.

Related Characters: Martin Cunningham (speaker), Tom Kernan, Mr. M'Coy, Jack Power

Related Themes:

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation occurs during a long, detailed discussion between Kernan, Power, M'Coy, Cunningham, and eventually Fogarty that takes up much of the story. In the conversation, the men discuss various pieces of Catholic Church history and theology as they try to convince Kernan to attend a Catholic retreat with them.

In this quotation, Martin Cunningham claims that the Jesuit Order, a Catholic religious order well-regarded in Ireland, has never been changed throughout the history of the Church. However, Cunningham's remark is illogical. The Jesuits were founded in 1534, making them relatively young in terms of Church history: widespread religious reform of the kind Cunningham is discussing occurred centuries before the Jesuits even existed. Further, Cunningham's implication that the Jesuits never fell under papal disregard is also untrue; in the eighteenth century, the Jesuits were poorly regarded by the papacy.

When Cunningham makes these sorts of repeated mistakes while trying to assert his religious knowledge, it calls into question his intellectual or moral authority. Why, the reader is forced to wonder, is this man qualified to supervise Kernan's religious redemption? Cunningham's mistakes also paint a picture of him as a man who enjoys the social status that his religious "knowledge" gives him more than he actually prizes actual religious knowledge. Given that Power and other friends frame Cunningham as the model churchgoer for Kernan to follow, this passage presents Cunningham—and the Catholic Church, by association—as flawed, lacking in understanding, and more interested in social status than actual religious piety or devotion. Even as the story continues with its seeming arc of portraying Kernan's redemption through his friends and Catholicism, it undermines that arc by showing both his friends and Catholicism as being flawed and shallow.

--But, of course, said Mr Cunningham quietly and effectively, our religion is *the* religion, the old, original faith.

Related Characters: Martin Cunningham (speaker), Mr. M'Coy, Jack Power, Tom Kernan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 165

Explanation and Analysis

Following Kernan's happy recollection of once going to see Father Tom Burke, a popular Catholic preacher, with his Protestant friend Crofton, Kernan and his friends ponder the often violent division between Protestants and Catholics in Irish society. Power, M'Coy, and Kernan wonder if the two religious sects have more in common than either side acknowledges, but Cunningham quickly puts an end to the conversation with this statement, unequivocally declaring Catholicism the superior faith.

All of the main characters in "Grace" are Catholics, though with varying degrees of faith; Cunningham is relatively devout (even if he makes mistakes about Church doctrine), Mrs. Kernan believes in Catholicism and elements of Irish paganism, while Mr. Kernan mainly became a Catholic in order to marry his wife and regularly makes jabs at his own religion. One of the primary ways that these characters assert their Catholicism is through denouncing the alternative (Protestantism), as Cunningham does in this quotation. However, as Kernan, Power, and M'Coy point out, many of the differences between these two sects are relatively superficial differences in liturgy rather than the underlying scripture and principles of Christian faith, which are largely quite similar.

At the time "Grace" was written—a time of growing rift between Irish Catholics and Protestant, which within a decade would lead to civil war—this suggestion of similarity would have been seen as radical. Because of the influence of the Church is society and politics, it would have carried implications touching on all facets of Irish public life. That it is the most devout of the men who shuts the conversation down also implies that the religious leaders were complicit in stoking up these tensions.

--Allow me, said Mr Cunningham positively, it was *Lux upon Lux*. And Pius IX. his predecessor's motto was *Crux upon Crux* that is, *Cross upon Cross* – to show the difference between their two pontificates.

Related Characters: Martin Cunningham (speaker), Mr. M'Coy, Mr. Fogarty , Jack Power, Tom Kernan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation is part of a long, complex conversation shared between Kernan, Power, M'Coy, Cunningham, and to a lesser extent, Fogarty, in which the five men discuss Church history and theology and subtly try to one-up each other with their knowledge. Here, Cunningham intervenes in a discussion about papal mottos, definitively claiming that the motto of Pope Leo XIII was "Lux upon Lux" and his predecessor Pius IX's was "Crux upon Crux."

Both of these mottos are linguistic absurdity. "Lux" and "Crux" are Latin words—meaning "light" and "cross" respectively—while "upon" is an English word. To combine them both in one motto makes no sense. Moreover, popes actually do not even take mottos for themselves; the characters may be confusing these "mottos" with papal encyclicals, which are public letters sent by the Pope to his bishops.

Cunningham's arrogant hypocrisy in confidently making this false assertion casts doubt on his qualification to act as a moral guide and superior to Kernan. Further, the fact that Cunningham is accepted as the authority among the men, while quite clearly being nothing of the sort, further implicates the way that Catholicism functions in Irish

society. The churchgoers are ill-taught, opinionated without being knowledgeable, and raise up the self-confident rather than the wise. Put another, there is a kind of hollowness to Irish Catholicism as it is portrayed in "Grace," which forces the reader to wonder whether the Catholicism that motivates these men would, in fact, be a beneficial influence on Kernan's life, given that it has not prevented them from telling falsehoods (knowingly or not) and acting proudly.

--No, damn it all, said Mr Kernan sensibly, I draw the line there. I'll do the job right enough. I'll do the retreat business and confession, and...all that business. But...no candles! No, damn it all, I bar the candles!

Related Characters: Tom Kernan (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

After agreeing to attend a Catholic retreat with his friends, Kernan almost backs out at the last second; as demonstrated in this quotation, he objects to the use of candles in the Catholic liturgy of the retreat.

Candles, for Kernan, symbolize how the Catholic Church takes a more mystical approach to religion than the Protestantism he grew up with. His narrow attitude toward religious difference almost stops him from attending the retreat and experiencing its potentially redemptive spiritual cleansing. Kernan's hesitation concerning the candles suggests that, for everyday people, ceremonial or ritualistic differences between Catholicism and Protestantism are the primary sources of division, rather than the underlying scripture and principles of Christian faith.

However, the fact that Kernan is still willing to attend the retreat, despite his serious objection to the candles and all they symbolize, demonstrates the substantial progress he has made across the span of the story. Whereas he began the story in denial of his own drinking problem, brushing off his friends' concern with a cursory "it's nothing," by the story's conclusion he commits to attending the retreat despite his spiritual reservations. Kernan's change in perspective suggests that community support and friendship is just as—if not more—important than religious intervention.

If he might use the metaphor, he said, he was their spiritual accountant; and he wished each and every one of his hearers to open his books, the books of his spiritual life, and see if they tallied accurately with conscience.

Related Characters: Father Purdon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

In this statement, Father Purdon lays out the foundational metaphor to his sermon at the retreat: that he is like a spiritual accountant to his congregation, whose sins and good deeds are equivalent to debts and credits.

Unlike what one might expect from a religious speech, there is little spirituality in Purdon's sermon. Instead, he embraces the soulless business metaphors quoted above. These metaphors present the Catholic Church as a bank where one "deposits" sin and "withdraws" redemption, rather than a place of spiritual growth and care. Banking metaphors also further color the the Catholic Church as a hypocritical institution: instead of creating lasting moral change in its devotees, the Church merely facilitates a surface-level trade of sin for redemption. This facile exchange offers no evidence that believers will actually change their ways or morals, only that they can be forgiven so long as they repent.

To a certain extent, Purdon picks the banking metaphor for his sermon because he is preaching to a group of businessmen and other white-collar laborers in Dublin. He frames the sermon in their language to make it approachable and relevant. However, in doing so, he sacrifices the spiritual sincerity and theological depth that could actually produce lasting change in his congregation. The various Catholic churchgoers in the story, from Mrs. Kernan to Mr. Cunningham, have all been shown to be deficient in religious knowledge or true piety. Purdon's sermon, while meant to engage such churchgoers, fails by stooping to that level, by *enabling* such behavior, rather than by lifting those churchgoers up to a different plane.

--Well, I have looked into my accounts. I find this wrong and this wrong. But, with God's grace, I will rectify this and this. I will set right my accounts.

Related Characters: Father Purdon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

This passage marks both the end of Father Purdon's sermon and the end of the story itself. In it, Purdon encourages the businessmen congregated at his church retreat to confess their sins, redeem themselves, and thereby "set right [their] accounts." Building on the banking metaphor he introduced earlier in his sermon, Purdon frames sin as a kind of debt that can be settled if one confesses. This simplistic "financial" exchange, in which confession automatically absolves one of all misdeeds, does not however imply any long-term moral or lifestyle change. By framing his sermon in such facile terms, Purdon does not seem particularly capable as an instigator of permanent change for Kernan.

Even beyond the anticlimax of Purdon's unconvincing sermon, the fact that the story ends immediately at this quotation means that the reader is given no hint about whether or not Kernan will actually change his behavior. After the profound efforts of his friends to get him to the retreat, nothing at the retreat itself implies that Kernan will change his ways, except for the fact that he was able to make it there in the first place. In the story, the Catholic Church does not come across as the all-powerful institution that characters like Cunningham and Power believe it to be. Rather, the more powerful force of salvation and redemption is the communal support of friendship, especially for individuals like Kernan down on their luck. That the story ends with the sermon, and without giving a glimpse of whether Kernan fails or succeeds (or even tries) to set himself back on the right path, shifts the focus of the story from being about whether Kernan will find redemption, to whether the Irish Catholic Church, as depicted in the story, can offer *anyone* the grace of redemption.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

GRACE

In a pub bathroom in Dublin, Ireland, two men try to lift up another man who's fallen down the **stairs**. They manage to turn the fallen man over onto his back; he's covered in filth from the pub floor, and his mouth is oozing blood. Then, with the help of a bartender, the two men are able to carry the injured man up the stairs and lay him back down on the floor.

From the reference to a pub, readers can infer that this unidentified man's accident has occurred due to excessive drinking. Through the detailed descriptions of filth, ooze, and blood, the man is in serious trouble physically. Moreover, the story portrays him as being at a moral or spiritual crisis. He lies at the bottom of a flight of stairs: it seems he has hit rock bottom, literally and figuratively.

The pub manager asks if anyone knows who the injured man is, but no one does. The bartender served the injured man rum earlier, and he was with two other men at that time—but no one knows where his companions are now. Noticing blood pooled under the disheveled, semi-conscious man's head, the worried manager calls the police. Eventually, a constable arrives and takes down the manager's account of what happened. He, too, asks who the injured man is—but again, no one answers.

It's striking that the man is alone: in this scene at the pub, everyone else seems to be accompanied by friends. The reader can infer that the man has been abandoned by whoever he came with. It's also noteworthy that the bar manager calls the police after seeing how injured the man is: rather than calling medical services, he defaults to law enforcement, likely to avoid any liability on the part of the bar. Rather than helping the man, the bartender protects himself and his establishment. Calling the constable immediately also demonstrates how much the police dominate this Dublin society.

Suddenly, a young man in a cycling-suit makes his way through the crowd of bystanders and calls for water and brandy, which the bartender promptly delivers. The young man washes the blood out of the injured man's mouth and then forces brandy down his throat, which shocks the injured man awake. The bystanders help the man to his feet and begin chattering about taking him to a hospital. The constable then asks the injured man where he lives, but the man ignores him and requests that someone call him a cab.

The young man in a cycling-suit (a bicycling uniform) comes essentially out of nowhere to the man's aid: in carrying out this act of altruism, he functions as a kind of Good Samaritan—a figure from the Bible who represents selfless charity—in the story. It's clear that individuals rely on the help of others in this society. However, despite the efforts of the man in a cycling-suit, the man who had fallen rejects most offers of help: it is suggested that he is either too proud to accept the help or is still intoxicated and unaware of the severity of his injuries. Either way, his drunkenness renders him isolated and unable to accept help.

Just then, a tall man named Mr. Power joins the crowd and recognizes the injured man, calling out to him and referring to him as Tom. He tells the constable (who seems to know Mr. Power) that he'll see Tom home, and the young man in the cycling-suit explains what happened as he helps Mr. Power lead Tom out of the pub. Meanwhile, the manager shows the constable the scene of the accident as the bartender cleans Tom's blood off the floor.

Only at the entrance of Mr. Power does the reader learn the name of the man who had fallen down the stairs: Tom Kernan. Delaying the name for so long emphasizes his anonymity at the bar, and even implies that this isolation is in part to blame for his accident since no one was checking in on him.

Outside the pub, Mr. Power hails a cab. Tom thanks the young man for his help, introduces himself as Kernan, and suggests that they have a drink together sometime. On the cab ride to Tom Kernan's house, Mr. Power asks how the accident happened—but Kernan claims that he isn't able to answer, showing Mr. Power that he bit off a piece of his tongue when he fell down the **stairs**.

It is deeply ironic that Kernan thanks the man in the cycling-suit by inviting him out for a drink, given that he has just suffered serious injuries due to his heavy drinking. Moreover, Kernan's bitten tongue symbolizes this self-destructive behavior: it is literally inflicted by himself on his own body. It also prevents him from explaining (and thus acknowledging) his mistakes to Power. Thwarting his ability to communicate is another way that Kernan's drinking makes him isolated.

Kernan is a traveling salesman with old-fashioned sensibilities—he cares about being dignified, so he always wears a silk hat and gaiters. He has a small office at his firm, in which he keeps different kinds of tea that he likes to sample.

Based on Kernan's clothing of choice, which are quite old-fashioned and highbrow, the reader can infer that he wants to be part of high society and likely had a good sum of money at some point with which he could purchase these clothes. However, having seen where Kernan is now and the extent of his drinking, the reader realizes now that not only is Kernan in dire straits, but that he has fallen quite a ways to reach this low point.

Mr. Power, who's much younger than Kernan, works at the Royal Irish Constabulary Office in Dublin Castle. Mr. Power has risen socially and professionally in tandem with Kernan's decline—though Mr. Power and Kernan's other close friends still hold Kernan in high esteem, because they knew him at his most successful. Mr. Power is rumored to have mysterious debts, but he's a charming young man nonetheless.

Mr. Power is the antithesis of Mr. Kernan. He is young and on the rise, his business gains posed directly in opposition to Kernan's recent failures. Yet because he still respects Kernan, the reader can infer that Power cares about his friends as much as his material successes. Those successes are hinted to be slightly questionable however: Power's implied debts call into question his integrity as a businessman, and perhaps can be taken as a subtle indictment of the legitimacy of any *social success..*

When the cab arrives at Kernan's house, Mr. Power helps him in, and Mrs. Kernan immediately puts him to bed. Mr. Power waits downstairs and converses with the Kernan children, who start to play around with him in the absence of their parents. Mr. Power is shocked by their accents and lack of manners. When Mrs. Kernan returns from putting her husband to bed, she confides in Mr. Power about her exasperation with Kernan's heavy drinking. Mr. Power rushes to explain that he wasn't responsible for Kernan's latest drinking binge, but he assures Mrs. Kernan that he'll help him make a fresh start anyway. He promises to bring someone named Martin over to speak with Kernan soon, and then he says goodbye to Mrs. Kernan and sets off in the cab.

Upon entering the Kernan household, Power realizes the full extent of his friend's downfall: Kernan's wife clarifies the dire state of his drinking, and his children speak in what Power interprets as a lower-class Dublin accent (a concrete representation of Kernan's social decline). Though Power is quick not to take responsibility for Kernan's drinking that evening, he demonstrates his care for his friend by committing to helping him turn over a new leaf. Furthermore, by incorporating another person, Martin, into this redemption project, Power begins to rally a community to support this individual in decline. Power's effort testifies to the importance of community amid what the story implies are the isolating effects of modern urban living.

Mrs. Kernan watches Mr. Power's cab pull away from her house and then silently reflects on the past 25 years of her marriage to Mr. Kernan, throughout which she has been very unhappy. Kernan was a handsome, charming man when they were first married—but within weeks, Mrs. Kernan grew tired of her role as a housewife. Two of the couple's children have grown up and left the house—and moved away from Dublin—while their three youngest still live with them. The next morning, Mr. Kernan wakes up and stays home sick from work. Mrs. Kernan scolds him for his latest transgression, but she's nonetheless thankful that he's not abusive like other "worse husbands."

Mrs. Kernan's silent reflections on her years on unhappiness in marriage demonstrate the negative repercussions of isolation. Unlike the community support building for Mr. Kernan, Mrs. Kernan appears to be entirely alone in her suffering, abandoned by her husband and lacking any female friends. Even her children, when they grow up and stop needing her support, move away. The profound extent of her unhappiness testifies to the importance of the kind of friendship and community that Kernan has coming to his aid. Though Mrs. Kernan is grateful that Kernan is not abusive, and thus not as bad as other husbands, the reader gets the sense that Kernan's home life is in equal disrepair as his professional life, in no small part due to his drinking. Further, the story sets up Mrs. Kernan as a kind of counterpoint to Mr. Kernan, whose experience suggests that even in comparison to a man who has fallen so low, the women connected to such men always have it worse.

Two nights later, three of Kernan's friends—Mr. Power, Mr. Cunningham, and Mr. M'Coy—arrive at the Kernans' house. Kernan is unaware that he's the victim of a plot that Power has thought up and entrusted Mr. Cunningham with carrying out. Mr. Kernan was raised Protestant and only converted to Catholicism when he married Mrs. Kernan; he often takes jabs at the Catholic Church. Mr. Cunningham, an older colleague of Mr. Power, seems like exactly the right person to help Kernan. Everyone pities Cunningham for his own unhappy marriage to a drunkard, but everyone still respects him for his intelligence and sensibility.

The fact that his friends keep their "plot" secret from Mr. Kernan implies that they anticipate potential resistance from him—a demonstration of the extent of Kernan's pride and denial when it comes to his drinking. When the narrative quickly switches to describing Kernan's religious background; the reader gets the sense that religion will have something to do with this plot, and, perhaps, with Kernan's resistance. Kernan's Protestant background and eventual conversion to Catholicism to marry his wife is noteworthy: Irish society is itself divided along Protestant and Catholic lines, so Mr. Kernan occupies an intriguing gray area between the two. Even though he has converted, the reader gets the hint that he is not all that convinced by Catholicism's teaching because he frequently makes fun of the Church. Also in this passage the reader learns a bit about Cunningham, one of Kernan's friends, who is himself married to a drunkard. The prevalence of drinking in the story suggests that this is a not-infrequent problem in this society—an indication that Kernan's fall might be mirrored more generally by Dublin and Ireland.

When the men told Mrs. Kernan about their plan, she expressed her trust in Cunningham. However, Mrs. Kernan is more of a habitual Catholic than a devout one, and she isn't confident that a middle-aged man like Kernan will be open to new ideas. Nevertheless, though, the plot might help him—it can't hurt, anyway. For her part, Mrs. Kernan believes in the Sacred Heart and the sacraments—but she also believes in the banshee and the Holy Ghost.

In this passage, the reader gains further insight into religion in the Kernan household (and in Ireland more broadly). Mrs. Kernan is a self-defined Catholic and maintains some faith, but she also believes in elements of pagan mythology like the banshee. She isn't altogether confident that her religion can 'save' her husband. In other words, Mrs. Kernan's Catholicism isn't thorough or knowledgeable, and her pagan beliefs are, according to Catholic doctrine, sinful. That she trusts Kernan's friends is another example of the importance of community, and also a significant indicator in the difference between men and women in this society: Mrs. Kernan seems not to have any friends.

The men begin to discuss Mr. Kernan's incident in the pub. M'Coy asks Kernan if his tongue still hurts, which it doesn't—but he's still feeling sick. M'Coy has lived a colorful life with a variety of jobs—presently, he's the secretary to the City Coroner, which makes him professionally interested in helping Kernan. Cunningham asserts that Kernan's drinking is what's making him sick, but Kernan denies it. Next, Cunningham asks who Mr. Kernan was with at the pub; Kernan identifies one of the people he was with as Harford, but he doesn't remember the other one. Mr. Cunningham judges Kernan's choice to associate with Harford—Harford is business partners with Mr. Goldberg, an Irish Jew, and Cunningham is suspicious of Jewish people.

Kernan's denial of the extent of his heavy drinking and its negative impacts on his life continues over this passage: he acknowledges that he feels sick, but he doesn't accept any connection between the "sickness" and his drinking problem. It's clear that Kernan is in need of help to everyone but Kernan himself at this point. This passage also sheds some more insight on Kernan's friends. It's mentioned, for instance, that M'Coy has "professional" interest in Kernan's case because he works at the City Coroner. This is a macabre joke: the coroner's office processes deaths, so part of M'Coy takes interest in Kernan because he has some familiarity with death and sees Kernan headed in that direction. The reader also learns who was at the bar with Kernan when he had his accident: Harford, a man that Cunningham doesn't trust because he associated with Mr. Goldberg, an Irish Jew. Cunningham's suspicion springs from antisemitism, and adds nuance to the theme of Irish religion by introducing Judaism in the Protestant/Catholic mix. Protestant and Catholics may be at odds in Irish society, as will become clearer through the rest of the story, but Jews clearly occupy an even more outsider role in Dublin society. Religion in the story does so much to divide people.

Mr. Kernan quickly changes the subject to the young man in the cycling-suit who saved him from being arrested by the constable in the pub. All four men express their annoyance with the fact that their taxes go toward the police, whom they find ignorant and foolish. They are then interrupted by Mrs. Kernan bringing in a tray of drinks for all of the men except Mr. Kernan. She and Kernan get into a brief spat over this, exchanging sarcastic barbs with each other.

Worth noting here is that the character's distrust of law enforcement in Dublin is tied up in the nationalist and religious politics that roiled Ireland at the time of the story. Law enforcement is an extension of the Protestant British government, and many Irish people—particularly Irish Catholics—at the time were beginning to resist British rule over their country. It's implied, then, that the men's frustration with their police has something to do with their distrust of Britain as well. This passage also includes a brief exchange between the Kernan couple, in which Mr. Kernan gets angry at his wife for not bringing him a drink; the exchange fortifies the reader's understanding of the unhappiness of their marriage, of their mutual isolation.

After the bottle of stout (dark beer), has been passed around, Mr. Cunningham subtly brings up a spiritual retreat that he, Power, and M'Coy are all planning to attend on Thursday. Kernan inquires more about it, prompting Cunningham to suggest that Kernan should join them, as if the idea had just occurred to him. Kernan silently considers the idea—he isn't particularly interested in the retreat, but he knows that he should listen respectfully while his friends are discussing religious matters.

Several pages of dialogue pass before Cunningham offhandedly mentions the retreat to Kernan, a fact which underscores the subterfuge in Kernan's friends' plan. Even in bringing it up, Cunningham does not directly implicate Kernan or his drinking. Rather, by claiming that he, Power, and M'Coy were all planning to go anyway, he makes it seem less like a judgment on Kernan's behavior, hopefully enticing him to come. Kernan's silence in response to the idea conveys his trepidation towards the idea and his general skepticism concerning religion. His respectful silence at this point seems to indicate a concern for acting in a socially acceptable way rather than any actual openness to religion.

While Kernan is thinking over the proposal, the conversation turns to the Jesuits, an order of the Catholic Church. Mr. Cunningham and Mr. M'Coy each showily share their admiration for the Jesuits, proclaiming that the General of the Jesuits is right next to the Pope in status. Mr. Cunningham says that Jesuits are so esteemed that they've never been reformed in the history of the Church.

As the conversation turns to the Jesuits, Cunningham and M'Coy compete to show off their knowledge of Church history. This thing is, both of them make many errors: the Jesuit leadership is not "right next to the Pope" in importance, nor have the Jesuits never been reformed. Earlier the story showed Mrs. Kernan's "habitual" Catholic belief, which involved very little actual knowledge or deep piety. Here the many mistakes that Cunningham and M'Coy make as they attempt to show off their religious knowledge offer another indictment of Irish Catholicism: these "experts" also don't really know anything. Their religious belief seems to give them social prominence rather than spiritual knowledge. So even as the story shows Kernan's friends banding together to try to help him by bringing him more fully into Irish Catholicism, it implies that Irish Catholicism may in fact be somewhat hollow.

Mr. Kernan chimes in to say that he likes that the Jesuits cater to the upper classes, but he criticizes "secular priests," whom he finds foolish and arrogant. Mr. Cunningham disagrees, arguing that the entire Irish priesthood is honorable and world-renowned. Kernan thinks about this and decides that he believes Cunningham, since he respects him as a good judge of character. He then asks his friends for more details about the spiritual retreat. Mr. Cunningham tells Kernan that the retreat is a casual affair and will be led by Father Purdon, a Catholic priest known for his laid-back style.

Kernan's eventual agreement with Cunningham comes not from Cunningham's convincing argument or knowledge, but rather from Kernan's personal trust of Cunningham as a good judge of character. And yet, this is a deeply ironic assessment, as what the story is really doing in these passages is to call into question Cunningham's intellectual superiority, and to reveal Cunningham as self-confident without much basis for it. The reader is meant to wonder whether Cunningham is any more qualified to speak on Church history or theology than Kernan. This doubt is further supported when Cunningham mentions the name of the priest for the retreat: Father Purdon. "Purdon Street" was the location of the prostitution district in Dublin at the time. Up until this point the story has portrayed the Catholic churchgoers as rather unimpressive religiously-speaking, but by giving the priest the name Purdon and thereby associating the actual Church leadership with the seedy and unwholesome underbelly of Dublin society, the story ups the odds and implies that the Irish Catholic Church itself is the problem.

The conversation about Purdon segues to Father Tom Burke, a famous preacher in Dublin from several decades back. Mr. Kernan recalls seeing him with a friend Crofton, and he talks about how much they loved Burke's sermons. Cunningham soon interjects, pointing out that Crofton was a Protestant Orangeman and therefore wasn't supposed to be at the Catholic Burke's sermons. Mr. Power points out that Burke appealed to both Catholics and Protestants, and M'Coy suggests that there is not much difference between the two sects of Christianity. Cunningham quietly puts an end to the discussion by affirming that Catholicism is "the old, original faith."

Kernan chimes into the conversation once the topic of Father Tom Burke comes up because he recalls fondly experiencing Burke's sermons with a Protestant friend named Crofton. Kernan's affection towards his Protestant friend highlights again his position between the Catholic and Protestant factions of Ireland. Power and M'Coy make comments in support of across-the-aisle messaging, such as that implied by Kernan's friendships and Burke's appeal. However, once Cunningham steps in to declare Catholicism the true version of Christianity, this momentary step towards progress in uniting their community falls apart. This passage demonstrates the longevity of religious divides in the men's community, despite clear evidence of desire to overcome it. That it is the religious "expert" Cunningham who insists on these barriers further implies that it is the religious authorities who enforce such difference.

The discussion is interrupted by the arrival of Mr. Fogarty, a grocer who has brought a bottle of whiskey for Mr. Kernan. The men have another round of drinks, and Fogarty joins in the conversation, which turns to the papacy. The men get to discussing the various papal mottos of popes from across the ages, each recalling slightly different versions of them. Mr. Power remarks that he and Mr. Kernan never learned any of the mottos, since they went to a "penny-a-week" school and received a lesser education than the other men.

The appearance of Mr. Fogarty and the bottle of whiskey he has brought for Kernan presents another obstacle to Kernan's potential recovery. It becomes clear that the very bonds of friendship in this society are connected to the drinking of alcohol, which of course would pose problems for an alcoholic.Meanwhile, once the conversation turns to the papacy and papal mottos, the limits of the men's religious knowledge becomes even more clear. They make many mistakes, combining languages and switching up mottos, if not entirely fabricating them. Once again, these men are seeking to help Kernan by bringing him into the religious fold, but their own religious and moral superiority is called into question. Power's comment is noteworthy in this regard: he and Kernan went to a poorer school growing up, and have thus not had an equivalent education to Cunningham, M'Coy, and Fogarty. However, the comment can be taken both ways, as even the "better" educations of the other men has left them with an at-best shallow understanding of history and religion.

Meanwhile, Kernan tries and fails to remember points of Protestant theology that he can contribute to the conversation. He ends up asking Cunningham if he's correct in thinking that some of the older popes were less than ideal, and Cunningham admits that this is true. However, he insists that no pope has ever preached false doctrine. The men then continue to discuss the papacy and argue over whether or not popes speak *ex cathedra*, or with automatic infallibility. Cunningham tells a story about two cardinals at the sacred college—John MacHale and a German cardinal—who refused to acknowledge papal infallibility. MacHale, however, submitted to the Pope as soon as he spoke, demonstrating his faith. The enthusiastic way Cunningham tells this story inspires the other men.

Kernan, although he cannot remember specifics of his Protestant theology, questions the dominance of the papacy, a specifically-Catholic institution. Even though he has converted, it is clear that he maintains a Protestant's skepticism towards the Catholic institution: again he occupies a unique position between the two faiths. Cunningham's response allows Kernan some ground, but doubles down on a power called "ex cathedra," which means that everything the Pope says is automatically true. This confidence, along with the story about the two cardinals, inspires trust in Cunningham from the other men, even if Kernan's question is a good one. Cunningham's insistence on the Pope's infallibility is deeply ironic, given how many falsehoods (even if unintentional) he has told during the discussion.

Just then, Mrs. Kernan returns to the room and begins to listen in on the men's conversation. Kernan shares that he once saw MacHale speak at a statue unveiling ceremony, recalling how fierce and perceptive his gaze looked. After a pause, Mr. Power declares to Mrs. Kernan that they will make her husband a pious man. Then, Kernan's friends prepare to leave and remind him that he needs to bring a candle to the church in order to participate in the retreat. Kernan strongly objects to the use of candles, calling them "magic-lantern business." He eventually agrees to go, on the grounds that he is not forced to use the candle.

Mrs. Kernan's reappearance in the narrative is sudden: the readers have almost forgotten she is also present in the house, which once again draws attention to how she is isolated from this community of men. As the men begin to prepare to depart, their reminder to Kernan to bring a candle for the retreat prompts a jarring outburst. The candle symbolizes the mystic dimensions of Catholicism for Kernan, something which he deeply distrusts. Even though Kernan has seemed to occupy a position between faiths, here the reader sees the limits of that position. Kernan cannot quite bring himself to accept this side of Catholicism, though he agrees still to attend the retreat. In this way the story shows how men in practice can and do navigate religion in their own ways, even if such choices cut against the rigid rules of those religions.

That Thursday, Kernan, Power, Cunningham, M'Coy, and Fogarty arrive at the Gardiner Street Jesuit Church for the retreat. They sit down together in the pews and soon realize that they recognize many acquaintances in the crowd. Soon, Father Purdon emerges and struggles to ascend the **pulpit**. He's a large man, taking up two-thirds of the pulpit, with a huge red face. Father Purdon leads the congregation in kneeling and then reads the scriptural passage for the day (Luke 16:8-9), which he describes as one of the most difficult passages of the Bible to interpret. He says that it's an important passage for practical businessmen and professionals.

The presence of many of Kernan, Power, Cunningham, M'Coy and Fogarty's friends in the crowd at the retreat underscore the importance of group support for this community: the men take comfort in being in the presence of those they know, and that community offers a comfort that is more powerful than any message actually offered by religion. As Father Purdon enters, his ascending of the pulpit recalls Kernan's earlier fall down the stairs, with the pulpit connected to religious uplift or redemption in contrast to Kernan's "fall" that began the story. However, Father Purdon struggles to walk up those stairs, which once again implies that the priest—and the Church more broadly—aren't as secure in their own redemption as one might expect. Purdon then presents his sermon as being meant for just such people as Kernan and his friends: as being for "everyday" people who must focus on worldly things (like business) as opposed to spiritual things.

Father Purdon then launches into his sermon. He says that he has a deep understanding of human nature, and that he knows not everyone is called to devote their lives to religion—most have to live as regular people and concern themselves with worldly matters. Purdon describes himself as a "spiritual accountant" for the businessmen assembled in the church. He tells the congregation that Jesus Christ understands human weakness and failure—Jesus only wants people to keep their accounting honest and ensure that the "books of [their] spiritual life" are balanced. Purdon concludes his sermon by encouraging the congregants to set their accounts right.

Father Purdon's sermon hinges on comparing religious faith to business and accounting. Just as accountants help clients settle their debts, he argues, he as a priest can help his congregation absolve themselves of sin, or "settle their accounts." Purdon's metaphor implies a very straightforward understanding of good and bad, virtue and sin. It contains none of the spiritual complexity and understanding one would expect from a priest, and presents Catholicism as a kind of "service" performed for everyday folks who then don't have to take too much responsibility for their spiritual lives. In this way, the priest offers people a pardon for the sorts of shallow and un-knowledgeable Catholic belief on display in the rest of the story. But the fact that the priest's name—Purdon—is a kind of mangled version of "pardon" implies that such easy pardons may not, in fact, be the real thing. The story then ends abruptly, with the end of the sermon, and never shows whether the retreat was successful or if Kernan was able to find redemption and turn his life around. The story initially was set up as a redemption story, in which a man literally "fell" and then his friends banded together to bring him to God and improve his life. That the story ends without even showing the outcome of that attempted redemption—forcing the reader to think about whether redemption is or isn't likely in this case—suddenly refocuses the story from being about the redemption of one man to one that focuses on whether and how such redemption is possible. More specifically, it forces the reader to consider whether Irish society and the Irish Catholic Church as portrayed in the story can offer such redemption.

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