

On the Mental Paralysis Theme in “A Little Cloud” from the Perspective of the Literary Stylistics

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Abstract

The theme of mental paralysis is one of the central and significant themes in James Joyce’s renowned collection of short stories *Dubliners*. It vividly portrays the life condition of Dubliners as being plagued by a lack of faith and trapped in a state of spiritual paralysis. Among these stories, “A Little Cloud” is the first story in *Dubliners* that portrays the adult stage of the mental paralysis. After closely reading this story, it becomes evident that Joyce strategically employs specific language choices that hold immense significance in effectively conveying the theme of mental paralysis. Therefore, this thesis aims to employ the theoretical framework of literary stylistics to analyze the linguistic deviations employed by Joyce in this story, trying to explore how Joyce expresses the theme of mental paralysis in his story.

Keywords: A Little Cloud, mental paralysis, literary stylistics, deviation

1. Introduction

Dubliners is a collection of short stories written by James Joyce during his early career, all set in the Irish capital Dublin. By depicting the living conditions of the ordinary working class in Dublin in the 20th century, James Joyce presents readers with a stagnant and indifferent city. Despite being composed of 15 independent short stories, *Dubliners* is organized in a whole to emphasize a common theme, that is, mental paralysis. As James Joyce stated in his letter to publishers, “My intention was to write a chapter of the moral history of my country, and I chose Dublin for the scene because the city seemed to me the center of paralysis.” (Hodgart, 1978: 44)

Mental Paralysis refers to a state in which an individual is unable to make decisions, take action or think clearly due to overwhelming anxiety, fear or confusion. It can manifest as a feeling of being mentally trapped, making it difficult to respond to situations effectively, thus leading to a sense of helplessness and inaction. In *Dubliners*, Joyce defines the apathetic and lifeless state of mind of the people in Dublin as “paralysis”. For paralysis, Joyce explains that, “I call the series *Dubliners* to betray the soul of that hemiplegia or paralysis which many consider a city” (Davies, 1993). And according to the study of Zhang Lei (2008), mental paralysis in *Dubliners* mainly focuses on paralysis in religion, political paralysis, emotional paralysis and psychological paralysis. The paralysis of Dublin resembles a “cancer” that spread uncontrollably in people’s life. As a result, the shadow of paralysis looms over every corner of *Dubliners*.

In this collection of short stories, Joyce portrays the city of Dublin as a representative of human development, showcasing different stages of life: childhood, adolescence, maturity and public life. However, from youth to adulthood, what remains throughout this journey is endless despair. “A Little Cloud” is the first story among *Dubliners* to describe the adult stage. It mainly tells the story of Little Chandler, an ordinary citizen of Dublin, who makes an appointment with his old friend Gallaher at Corless’s hotel. Little Chandler is filled with anticipation on the way, hoping that his friend Gallaher, who was once poor in London but now successful, can help him realize his dream of becoming a famous poet. However, as he talks to Gallaher, his beautiful dream gradually disappears like a cloud. In the end, facing the paralyzed social reality, Little Chandler sheds tears of regret.

After carefully reading this story, the author finds that the choice of language in the story is of great significance for Joyce to convey the theme of the story. Therefore, this paper will apply literary stylistics theory to analyze the phenomenon of deviation in the story and explore how Joyce expresses the theme of mental paralysis.

2. Analysis of Linguistic Deviations in the Story

In the field of literary texts, linguistic deviation becomes a central focus. Writers in various literary works are striving to use extraordinary language styles. By combining unique language features, they capture the reader's attention and achieve a distinctive writing style. Therefore, deviations are manifested in different poems and novels. Writers usually create effects of deviations by irregularity and overregularity. Irregularity is straightforward, referring to breaking existing conventions and defying norms. Overregularity, on the other hand, is more commonly referred to as juxtaposition, which achieves the effect through the frequent use of a conventional form. (Yu,2012) According to G. Leech (1969: 42-51) in his *Linguistic Guide to English Poetry*, there are eight types of deviations: lexical deviation, grammatical deviation, phonological deviation, graphological deviation, semantic deviation, dialectal deviation, deviation of register and deviation of historical period. In the following parts, lexical deviation, grammatical deviation and semantic deviation will be mainly explored.

2.1 Lexical Deviation

Firstly, vocabulary used to describe the character's personality traits is repeated throughout the passage. For example, the word "blush" appears five times in the text, all of which describe Chandler's demeanor, and the word "shyness", which conveys the same meaning, is also used to describe Chandler. It can be said that any trifle can make Chandler blush. When chatting with Gallaher about his marriage, he blushes and smiles from time to time. When he wants to read poems to his wife, shyness kept him from taking the first step, with poems remained on the bookshelf. He even blushes when buying a gift for his wife in a store, and leaves the stores nervously without taking back the change. Through the author's repetitive and detailed description of Chandler's shyness, the image of an introverted and timid intellectual presents in front of the readers.

There are many other recurring words in the story that describe Chandler's character, such as "melancholy" (6 times), "seriousness" (2 times), as well as phrases like "childish white teeth" and "three childishly white front teeth" (2 times). These words repeatedly appear in the Joyce's description of Chandler, not only describing his character as "sensitive, easily shy, serious but immature", but also gradually strengthening the reader's impression of the protagonist through intermittent repetition. This technique also adds the depth and dimension to character portrayal, making the image more vivid and comprehensive.

Moreover, Joyce's choice to place these words on a male character reminds the reader of Chandler's weak character. With such a character, Chandler is afraid to face the cruel reality and more difficult to succeed even if he occasionally has some ambitions. Irresolute, Chandler is doomed to fail, which showcases his mental paralysis.

Secondly, there is a misuse of formal vocabulary. In this sentence "*Giving no heed to him she began to walk up and down the room, clasping the child tightly in her arms and murmuring*" (Joyce, 2005: 79), the word "heed" is a formal term meaning to carefully observe someone or something, which is usually used in more formal and serious contexts. However, it appears in a conversation between Chandler and his wife at their own home. By misusing the word "heed" in this context, Joyce showcases the estranged relationship between Chandler and his wife, as well as the unhappy marriage that Chandler endures in a satirical way, which is also a reflection of the alienated interpersonal relationships of Dubliners.

Thirdly, some French words used in the text are also an example of lexical deviation: "...*Here, **garon**, bring us two halves of malt whisky...*" (Joyce, 2005: 69)

"Yes, that's agreed," said Ignatius Gallaher. "*Next year if I come, **parole d'honneur**.*" (Joyce,2005: 74) "**Bravo**," he said, "*I wouldn't doubt you, Tommy.*" (Joyce, 2005:73)

These words were spoken by Gallaher during his conversation with Chandler. Throughout the entire text, we know that they are communicating in English. However, Gallaher uses French words such as "garçon" and "parole d'honneur." Based on their previous conversations, we know that Gallaher has never left Dublin and has only been to the Isle of Man, while Gallaher has been to big cities like Paris and London and has broader experience. In this situation, Gallaher's seemingly casual use of French words is actually a show of pride, triggering Chandler's sense of inferiority and laying the foundation for his emotional changes in the later stages of the story. From here, readers can perceive the hypocritical and indifferent relationships between people, as well as foresee the shattering of Chandler's dream of being elevated by old friends.

2.2 Grammatical Deviation

2.2.1 The Alternating Use of Long and Short Sentences

The alternating use of long and short sentences can be observed in this story, particularly in the first part (paragraphs 1-11) where Joyce describes Chandler's mental activities on his way to the appointment. Most of these descriptions are presented in the form of long sentences, but there are also interspersed short sentences. For example:

"He turned to the right towards Capel Street." (Joyce, 2005: 67)

"Little Chandler quickened his pace." (Joyce, 2005: 67)

"He stepped onward bravely" (Joyce, 2005: 68)

"Finally he opened the door and entered." (Joyce, 2005: 68)

By observing the position of these short sentences, we can see that they usually appear at the beginning or the end of the paragraph. Afterwards, Joyce continues to describe Chandler's thoughts and desires, such as memories and admiration for his once poor friends, his dream of becoming famous through poetry, and his desire for achieving his dreams with the help of friend. These ideas are presented in the form of long sentences, showing the readers the flow of Chandler's consciousness. Meanwhile, these brief sentences describe Chandler's behavior and succinctly convey the location of the event. By changing the position of the protagonist, Joyce links his psychological activities together to form an organic whole that serves as a transitional effect. In addition, through the alternating use of these short and long sentences, Joyce expresses Chandler's characteristic of "thinking much but doing little", which foreshadows the shattering of his dreams.

2.2.2 The Use of Ellipses

The writer often highlights a certain element that needs to be emphasized through the arrangement of the sentence during writing. Sometimes the use of punctuation can disrupt the consistency of a sentence, thus attracting the attention of the reader. In "A Little Cloud", Joyce achieves this effect through the skillful use of ellipses. For example:

"But nobody denied him talent. There was always a certain...something in Ignatius Gallaher that impressed you in spite of yourself. Even when he was out at elbows and at his wit's end for money he kept up a bold face." (Joyce, 2005: 67)

On hearing that his old friend Gallaher is working at a prestigious London publishing house, astonished and proud, Chandler begins to reminisce about Gallaher's former poor life and great talents. In this psychological description, although Chandler is praising Gallaher's talent, the sudden pause in thought cannot help but provoke the reader to think further. On the surface, Chandler believes that Gallaher's success is due to his talent, and he is proud to have such a friend. But Gallaher would still be a punk if it were not for his courage to go to London. Joyce cleverly uses an ellipsis to convey Chandler's complex and contradictory feelings of admiration and reluctance to his friend's success. It was the success of his friend Gallaher that briefly sparked Chandler's inner dream.

2.2.3 the Use of Parallelism

There are many examples of parallelism in the story. Here are two examples along with their analysis:

"For the first time in his life he felt himself superior to the people he passed. For the first time his soul revolted against the dull inelegance of Capel Street." (Joyce, 2005: 67)

In this passage, Joyce uses two instances of "for the first time" to illustrate Chandler's boundless fantasies. For the first time, Chandler exhibits vitality as he contemplates writing a poem during his way to the pub, envisioning his old friend helping him publish it. He even imagines the melancholic tone of the poetry collection and the commentary from English critics. With each step towards the hotel, he is filled with anticipation. The repetition of "for the first time" vividly captures Chandler's intense emotions of anticipation while indirectly reflecting his previous state of dreary and numb existence, highlighting the theme of mental paralysis in the story.

"Gallaher was only patronizing him by his friendliness just as he was patronizing Ireland by his visit." (Joyce, 2005: 75)

At that moment, Chandler wanted to invite Gallaher to his house. But before he could finish speaking, Gallaher interrupted him and refused, saying he wanted to participate in a card game, and casually declined Chandler's invitation. Then the above sentence will appear in the story. Through the parallel structure of "patronizing...by",

Joyce expressed Chandler's strong emotions and epiphany. Chandler finally realized that Gallaher's true intention for returning was simply to show off his achievements, reminisce about the past, and maintain his dignity by inviting him to dinner together. Chandler understood that his friend's support was hopeless, and he realized that escaping this numb city and his dreams were nothing but illusions.

2.2.4 the Use of Repetition

Joyce also employs some repetition techniques in the story to express its mental paralysis theme, for example:

"It was useless. He couldn't read. He couldn't do anything. The wailing of the child pierced the drum of his ear. It was useless, useless! He was a prisoner for life." (Joyce, 2005: 78)

Chandler is rocking the child in his arms to soothe him and while reading Byron's poetry. However, as the child's crying grows louder, he cannot concentrate on the poems. As a result, he repeats "it was useless" twice with each repetition intensifying his emotions. On one hand, "useless" refers to his futile attempt to calm the child by rocking him. On the other hand, it also signifies his belief that reading the poetry is pointless. He feels that he cannot escape or solve his problems through reading poetry, and all his efforts are in vain. And then he realized that he is a prisoner for life, evoking a sense of deep powerlessness within the reader.

2.2.5 The Misuse of the Pronoun "it"

"He jumped up from his chair and walked hastily up and down the room with the child in his arms. It began to sob piteously, losing its breath for four or five seconds, and then bursting out anew. The thin walls of the room echoed the sound. He tried to soothe it, but it sobbed more convulsively..." (Joyce, 2005: 78)

This passage is written from Chandler's perspective as he tries to comfort his son. Throughout the text, we can notice that the pronoun "it" refers to "the child" - his son. While it is common to use the pronoun "he" to refer to a male, Joyce uses "it" instead. And when Chandler speaks to his wife, he uses the personal pronoun "he" (we can see that in Paragraph 120). But in his internal monologue, he uses "it". This misuse of "it" reflects Chandler's unconscious attitude that he personally does not view his son as a person but as an obstacle to his escape from Dublin. He owes his inability to concentrate on reading poetry and to realize his dream as a poet to his son, which also reveals Chandler's madness and inner distortion, demonstrating his mental breakdown.

Professo Zhang (2023) argues that the paralyzed identity expected by the empire permeates Irish people of all ages. The empty identity and identity anxiety formed under the control of the empire is like a curse, which makes people unable to find solace in love and care for others. Chandler is such an "incapable" person. When the child is crying out of breath, what he does is not to soothe the child, but to read poems to paralyze himself, and even thinks if the baby died. It is clear to the readers that Chandler does not identify with himself as the father of the child in his heart. And it is this empty identity that makes him unable to feel the warmth of his family, nor can he love his child and wife, only living in a muddled way.

2.3 Semantic Deviation

Semantic deviation refers to deep structure deviation. As Leech put out, "it is for the purpose of linguistic effects involving something odd in the cognitive meaning of a certain linguistic unit, e.g. a word or phrase". (Leech, 1969, 131) To simplify the concept of semantic deviation, it involves showcasing an unconventional way of combining words, which is commonly achieved through the use of figures of speech. In "A Little Cloud", metaphor and symbolism are two significant devices used by Joyce to reveal the mental paralysis theme.

2.3.1 the Use of Metaphor

In the novel, Joyce employs the rhetorical device of metaphor to vividly portray the people and streets of Dublin, effectively depicting the city's state of paralysis. Please consider the following two examples:

"A horde of grimy children populated the street. They stood or ran in the roadway, or crawled up the steps before the gaping doors, or squatted like mice upon the thresholds." (Joyce, 2005: 66)

This is the description of the children that Chandler saw on his way to the appointment. Joyce uses the rhetorical device of metaphor, comparing the children to mice. It is known to all that children are the future and hope of the country and they should be vibrant like the sun. But here the children are compared to mice, which makes the readers ponder that the country is decaying and gets into paralysis. At the same time, Joyce uses words such as "grimy" and "crawl" to describe the children in Dublin, which evokes readers feeling a sense of hopelessness and experiencing the lifeless atmosphere of Dublin.

"As he crossed Grattan Bridge, he looked down the river towards the lower quays and pitied the poor stunted houses. They seemed to him a band of tramps, huddled together along the river-banks, their old coats covered

with dust and soot, stupefied by the panorama of sunset and waiting for the first chill of night to bid them arise, shake themselves and begone." (Joyce, 2005: 67)

The above is the Joyce's description of the city of Dublin that Chandler saw on his way. Joyce uses the rhetorical device of metaphor, comparing the houses by the dock to a group of tramps, appearing drab in the sunset with dust everywhere. In Joyce's writing, the geographical space of the city and the inner world of the characters project and mirror each other (Xin, 2018). Although Chandler grew up in Dublin, the city appears to him like a destitute and decaying wanderer, leaving him devoid of any sense of belonging and safety like home.

Through this metaphor, Joyce vividly portrays the decline and dilapidation of the city of Dublin, making readers feel that living in such a depressing and dull living environment would make people numb and lifeless, which hints Chandler's ultimate failure to realize his dream.

2.3.2 the Use of Symbolism

As a watershed between classical and modernist literature, symbolism plays a significant role in the development of modernist literature in Europe and America. It emphasizes the use of symbols to imply the themes that the work, foreshadowing the narrative's progression while revealing the author's hidden thoughts and buried emotions, which finally makes readers to experience the abstract and profound philosophy of life. (Wang, 2014) One of the most notable artistic features in Joyce's works is his adept and flexible use of symbolism.

The title "A Little Cloud" holds a deeper meaning when considering the content of the story. Throughout the entire story, only "the clouds of smoke" is mentioned once, which has little relevance to the overall narrative, leaving readers pondering its significance.

As mentioned in the footnotes of the original text, the title "A Little Cloud" draws inspiration from a biblical story. It is derived from 1Kings 18:44, which describes Elijah praying for rain: "*And it came to pass at the seventh time, that he said, Behold, there ariseth a little cloud out of the sea, like a man's hand.*" (unknown, 2012: 879) Therefore, in *Bible*, "a little cloud" refers to the precursor of rain, symbolizing hope and the emergence of life.

In this story, "A Little Cloud" represents Chandler's brief dream---a glimmer of hope in his dull and monotonous life. With the arrival of his old friend Gallaher, he has gone from a poor person to a famous figure in the London news industry. For Chandler, this date injects him with new life for the first time, igniting his desire to write a poem and seek the help of his friends to publish it. He even envisions the melancholic tone in his poetry collection and foresaw the criticism of British critics. However, Chandler becomes uneasy upon seeing Gallaher and witnessing his rude behavior and tone. His invitation to Gallaher to his house is rejected, which makes Chandler realize that the likelihood of his friend's support is decreasing. When he returns to a crying child and his wife's reproach, he experiences an overwhelming sense of powerlessness. He understands that his dream of becoming a famous poet have been completely shattered, and he is trapped in the limitations of Dublin, unable to escape his numb life. His dream is like a fleeting cloud, dissipating and disappearing, ultimately transforming into tears of remorse.

In addition, "A Little Cloud" also symbolizes Chandler himself. Clouds are fleeting, drifting aimlessly, just like Chandler's character. The word "little" corresponds to the insignificance of Little Chandler, emphasizing his ordinary nature. Influenced by the gloomy atmosphere of Dublin, he floats like a small cloud, trapped in this lifeless city, dragged down by his own environment, ignored, and unable to control his fate.

In short, the title "A Little Cloud" has profound significance. It represents Chandler's hopes and dreams, as well as his helplessness in the face of dull and oppressive reality, revealing the theme of mental paralysis in this story.

Moreover, Joyce describes the scene of three twilight sunsets, which also conveys a certain symbolic meaning. The sunset ought to evoke images of splendor and warmth, but Joyce's portrayal presents a contrasting scene---the untidy nurses and decrepit old men drowsing on the benches. The paralyzing and dreary sight of Dublin at sunset symbolizes the dull lifestyle and paralyzed mental state of Dubliners. Thus, transcending its mere representation of decline, the sunset here is more like an invisible net that traps both the city and its people in a numb state of despair.

3. Conclusion

Mental paralysis has always been one of the themes in Joyce's *Dubliners*. This article explores the theme of mental paralysis in "A Little Cloud" from the perspective of literary stylistics, and discusses it from the aspects of lexical deviation, grammatical deviation, and semantic deviation, etc. As William York Tindall (1959) comments, "To the simple reader, deceived by surfaces, Joyce's stories may seem simple, but they are not so

simple as they seem. To the ingenious readers, these stories, though complicated enough, may seem more complicated than they are.” Joyce employs simple but exquisite language to vividly depict the dull and oppressive life of Chandler, a middle-class man. And through his choice of language, Joyce also portrays the image of an intellectual who is timid, indecisive and fond of fantasy. Living in a lifeless city, Chandler is burdened by the pressures of work, marriage and daily life. His mental paralysis manifests itself in weakness, indecision, and inability to control his own fate. Consequently, his dream ultimately shatters, leaving him a prisoner of life, which also deepens his psychological paralysis at the same time.

Actually, Chandler is a microcosm of many Dubliners. The mental paralysis of Dubliners is exacerbated by the corruption and hedonism of the Irish government, which fosters a pervasive sense of pessimism throughout Irish society, ultimately making Dublin the center of mental paralysis. This societal mindset is deeply influenced by the environment, creating a vicious cycle in which the Dubliners monotonously repeat their oppressive lives, unable to break free. To sum up, Joyce’s language is both simple and profoundly meaningful. Through nuanced dialogue, inner monologues, as well as his carefully chosen words and sentence patterns, he not only captures the despair and helplessness of Dubliners like Chandler, but also makes “A Little Cloud” a classic work of his linguistic art.

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