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### Finding Narrated, Unnarrated and Disnarrated in James Joyce's "The Sisters"

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#### Abstract

"The Sisters" is the first story in *the Dubliners*, a collection of fifteen short stories by James Joyce, first published in 1914. Most of the stories in the collection are in descriptive style either by the characters in first person narration or by omniscient in third person speech. The descriptive narrative is incorporated with fewer dialogues selectively at some crucial event. Story, "The Sisters" is one of the most perfectly crafted narratives from the point of view of a young boy who is also the character. The narrative of the story deals with multiple issues of religion, relationships, belief, paralysis (an abnormal physical state denoting mental illness as well) death and freedom and choose to disnarrated many events to create a sense of suspense and illusion in the story. Unnarrated and disnarrated is one of the emerging new techniques in the field of narrative theory. These narrative tool are discussed in great detail by Gerald Prince an American academic and literary theoretician, in an brief essay published in first issue of *Style* in 1988 This paper will analyse these narrative techniques and their application in the text and their after effects to the new kind of meaning they provide to it.

**Keywords-** Narrated, Unnarrated, Disnarrated, Subnarrated, Antinarrated

"The Sisters" is the first story in *The Dubliners*, a collection of fifteen short stories by James Joyce which was first published in 1914. Most of the stories in the collection are more of a description by the characters in first person narration. And contain fewer dialogues or selectively incorporated at some crucial event. The story of *The Sisters* is one of the perfectly crafted narrative details from the point of view of a young boy who is also the character. The

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narrative of the story deals with many serious issues of religion, relationships, belief, paralysis (an abnormal physical state denoting mental illness as well) death, freedom etc. and disnarrated many events to create a sense of suspense and illusion.

Disnarrated is a narrative tool that is discussed in great details by Gerald Prince in an brief essay published in first issue of *Style* in 1988 “The Disnarrated” which means those passages in a narrative that consider what did not or does not take place” (Prince 1988:1). It hints towards those incidents or events which actually did not happen in the text but are referred to as if they will occur.

Prince claims it to be a narrative strategy used to create the desired effects of hope, illusion, suspense and surprise in the text. He says;

That which according to a given narrative, cannot be narrated or is not worth narrating either because it transgresses a law, (social, authorial, generic, formal) or because it defies the powers of a particular narrator (or those of any narrator) or because it falls below the so called threshold of narratability (it is not sufficiently unusual or problematic). (Qtd. *In Warhol Narrating the Unnarratable*,78)

Under the light of Narrative Theory paper focuses to find out the narrated, unnarrated and disnarrated events in the narrative of *The Sisters*. The narrated events in any text include those sections which are communicated to us like the plot, setting of the story, characters, and their dialogues. At the same time the narrator choose to leave out many of the elements from the text either intentionally or unintentionally and sometimes refer to such events that have actually not happened in the text (a possibility or a desire).Both these situations, according to Prince, qualify for the category of Unnarrated and the Disnarrated respectively.

Prince (1992) has argued that the segments that are intentionally left out in a text by the narrator are either due to following reasons: If it transgresses a law, or not worth narrating, or because it has low threshold of narratability. The impacts generated due to the unnarrated and disnarrated in a text are different.

“The Sisters” is in first person narration by an unnamed young narrator. The story is about an unusual friendship between the narrator and an old age priest father Flynn, who is paralyzed and is on the verge of his death bed. The boy gets the news of father Flynn’s death from an old friend named old Cotter who pays visit at the narrators house. The boy overhears

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the conversation between Old Cotter and his parents and gets to know the disapproval of narrator's friendship with old priest. The Old Cotter also feels that the narrator should play with children of his own age instead confining himself to practices and teachings of church under the guidance of father Flynn. The boy spends most of his time with father Flynn learning the teachings and history of Catholicism.

### The Narrated

The story, "The Sisters" begins in the voice of a first person narrator who himself is a character in the story, a very young boy who's name and age is not described, probably in order to avoid individuality but to generalize him. The narrative begins with news of illness and death of father Flynn who took his last breath. The news was given by old Cotter to the boy's uncle and his aunty. Before the news came the boy was assuming whether father has died or not by the reflection of the burning candles because he was paralysed and was ill from many days severely. If he was dead, I thought, I would see the reflection of candles on the darkened blind for I knew that two candles must be set at the head of a corpse". The perspective reveals that the boy is sadden by the news of father Flynn's death because he uses to spend a lot of time with him learning the teachings of Catholicism and was supposed to be closer.

The other narrated events in the text that we are informed are the boy was quite close to the father Flynn in spite of everybody's dislike because the father was growing weird and bizarre in his ways and behaviour due to his deteriorating health and mental condition. The boy's uncle and aunt refer father Flynn as 'one of those peculiar cases 'reveals that they consider father as an abnormal old man now.

They were afraid that if he'd taken the boy under his wing it may affect the young boy's behaviour. The old priest wanted the boy to become a priest one day. The news of father Flynn's death was not conveyed directly in the story but the narrative was presented through the characters dialogues, pauses as if they were avoiding informing the boy.

### The Unnarrated Events

There are many events in the story that occurred but are left out by the narrator either deliberately or unintentionally, has an impact on the narrative. These events might have been

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left out by the narrator due to various reasons like those events may create an anxiety or their presence may not be that important or they are not worth being told (lacking narrative threshold).

The event of death of father Flynn was not narrated in the story as an individual event rather the death was observed in relation to the boy's reaction over it and the its influence on him. It is also revealed from the conversation of uncle and the Old Cotter that they are avoiding the use of the term growing mad for father although it is clearly illustrated in the dialogue of father Flynn's sister that he was growing weird in last few days and was not well in his senses. The sisters' conversation reveals the queer state of father Flynn.

The remarks by the Old Cotter about the strange behavior of father Flynn without addressing him directly also enhance the social pressure of not saying any ill things about a father of church. Further, he takes so many pauses in every sentence before he speaks anything about him and probably could not gather courage to say, remain silence. These silences and hesitation to speak something Unspeakable are the Unnarrated statements that very well builds up a suspense about the character of father Flynn in the tale.

Now if we narrate what is unnarrated by the speaker and re-assume the sentence by filling those pauses and gaps, with the words expected to be there, let's see what meaning would it create and how narrative will be affected. "No, I wouldn't say he was exactly **insane** but there was something queer (**pause without a word**) I'll tell you my opinion **later on.** (Joyce 3) Now it can be understood that by revealing what was being unnarrated in the sentence the effect of the uncertainty and doubtfulness is being erased. As a result the tension is ineffectual now which was required by the text being created by the father's death? And uncle expressed his opinion by announcing father as a Tiresome old fool! (Joyce 3) So far it is not at all directed that about whom Old cotter is referring to. The reference of father Flynn here is being unnarrated to create an illusion and suspense so that one may keep speculating about whom they are talking about.

The other event being unnarrated was the death of father. It can be understood by reading the happenings that the father's death was forcefully justified by the sisters, the old cotter, uncle and aunt; It can be used as a tool to misguide the readers focus and make them think about the anxiety and alarm of other characters that if father could have lived longer he

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would have turned the boy into the priest. The other occurrence that qualifies for unnarrated event is that the character of a boy is not being named unlike other characters in the story. This strategy works in generalizing the character as well as creating suspense about the true nature of boy's behaviour.

One more such possibility arises for the speaker to unnarrate few words and events in reference to father Flynn but since he was a priest's writer refrained his narrative from becoming unsuitable due to religious restriction. That falls in the category of *Antinarratable*, a term coined by Robyn R Warhol. According to him; *Antinarratable*: what shouldn't be told because of social convention or a social taboo?

Religion is one of the most predominant themes in most of the stories of Joyce that represents the social belief of Dublin and its society at that time. Reference to the priest, church, confession and sinful reveal the spiritual experiences of the characters. It appears that due to ill health and paralytic attack father Flynn was unable to handle his responsibility as priest of the church. Further it is also demonstrated that he cannot keep a strong grip on the chalice and goes mad in the confessional box. His incompetence was haunting other characters as well that led them say derogatory remarks about father in indirect way. The remarks spoken by them are made *Antinarratable* by the narrator in the text as it breaks the social law and convention for the priest of a catholic church. "I wouldn't like children of mine," he said, "to have too much to say to a man like that." (Joyce 4) The remarks are not directly referred to the Father, instead they use, man like that, it's bad for children etc. The reason provided by boy's uncle for disliking the father as a companion to the boy was; "It's bad for children," said old Cotter, "because their mind is so impressionable. When children see things like that, you know, it has an effect...."

Here the main reason behind father Flynn's health and his behaviour have been disnarrated by the writer because he holds respectable position in the society. So it would not be apt to speak about a priest any derogatory remarks that the father is unstable or he should be more respectful in his behaviour or should be more responsible in his teachings that he gives to the children. The facts have been disnarrated due to social norms. Instead uncle talks about children that they may be affected as their mind is innocent and impressionable.

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### Disnarrated in the Text

Now let's find out the Disnarrated events in *The Sisters*. The term Disnarrated was coined by Gerald Prince that signifies events that do not happen but still being referred to (as a possibility, wish or desire).

One may notice in the *Dubliners* many examples of events and words that do not happened but have been produced and expressed. In this story "The Sisters" the young boy imagines a possibility of meeting with the father, after reading the card of death news pinned on the crape.

"July 1<sup>st</sup> 1895

The Rev. James Flynn (formerly of Catherine's church, Meath Street), aged sixty-five year R.I.P. (Joyce 6)

The boy was still not sure of father's death and thus imagines a possibility of meeting him where he imagines; Had he not been dead I would have gone into the little dark room behind the shop to find him sitting in his arm chair by the fire, nearly smothered in his great-coat".

Further the boy refers to one more possibility of waking up of father from his coffin as he was still not sure whether he is dead or in deep sleep. He has these thoughts while visiting him for last time to bid a final goodbye, and thinks about an event that actually did not happen but referred by the boy; Perhaps my aunt would have given me a packet of high toast for him and this would have roused him from his stupefied doze".

The disnarrated event adds here a dimension to the meaning of this desire by the boy. This longing of boy shows that the demise of father Flynn was difficult for him to accept. And he wants to take a refuge from this painful reality in soothing illusions.

The disnarrated events here functioned to make the readers visualize an alternative reality and thus facilitate them to compare and better understand the inner emotions of the characters. The sense of freedom that the narrator was longing for was achieved but at the loss of the father and thus he was annoyed at this feeling too. The narrator confessed to himself that he was neither happy nor mourning. It is because he reassures the readers that he liked the company of the father irrespective of anyone liking. Father provided him a kind of refuge and escape in this world around for his various uncertainties and doubts the influence was

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unnarrated in the story but it was discussed among the Old Cotter and uncle and aunty as a fear. It shows a deeply rooted religious anxiety in the people of Dublin society and reveals the hypocrisy.

### **Elements of Unnarrated and disnarrated highlights the climax**

The opening lines of the story inform us through the voice of the young boy that the priest Father Flynn had the third fatal attack of paralysis which has shattered all the hopes in the young boy of father becoming well again. Although the boy narrator confesses that the term paralysis seems strange to him (as he is too young to understand this word) but considers it as equivalent to a deadly sin. The boy keeps guessing about the health of father from the candle lights coming out of the square windows of father Flynn's house. Although, he refrained himself from visiting the house personally but he was sure that the father is still living. If he was dead, I thought, I would see the reflection of the candles on the darkened blind for I knew that two candles must set at the head of the corpse."

The present story is not a depiction of any ghostly saga to create sensations of horror or shock but there are certain elements of suspense and awfulness which are very subtly being woven through the narrative of a young boy. This successfully provokes the mind to think at the supernatural and a mystic level.

The course of the narrative has some of the very unusual things which successfully creates the atmosphere of bizarre and awfulness, like the title. The title called *The Sisters* is from nowhere the centre of attention. Now if we look attentively, the characters of the two sisters of father Flynn has an important role to play as they are responsibly to reveals the deteriorating mental status of the priest. The character of the sisters (father Flynn's sisters) is introduced only in the climax scene of the funeral of father Flynn. Thus, the appearance of the sisters is important just from the point of view that they reveal fact that the father was growing weird in his behaviour in his last days. Their discussion in the funeral meet comes as a surprise to the boy who happens to be to pay his final visit there.

The way the story is composed makes it a perfect piece of modern tale where Joyce's narration is marked by various elements of narrative like gaps and pauses that acts as a tool to generate the meaning of beyond the written words. It also helps enhancing the desired bizarre

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ambience to the background of the story. Further, the limited first person narrator's view also restricts the knowledge being imparted to the readers.

The structure of the story is constructed in such a way that many events and statements fall into the category of antinarratable. Before gazing the story from this perspective I require explaining the term antinarratable introduced by Robyn R Warhol, an American Literary scholar, in her essay in the book named *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, originally published in 2005.

She in her essay discusses some of the emerging trends in narrative called as neonarrative. Unnarratable is one of those techniques which she defined as "Everything that according to a given narrative cannot be narrated or is not worth narrating either because it transgresses a law, or because it defies the powers of a particular narrator, or because it falls below the so-threshold of narratability. She further presents four sub categories of unnarratable based on their different threshold of narratability

1. The subnarratable: what needn't be told because it's "normal"
2. The supranarratable: what cant's be told because it's "ineffable"
3. The antinarratable: what shouldn't be told because of social convention, and
4. The paranarratable: what wouldn't be told because of formal convention

Elements of antinarratable are clearly visible in the story where every individual seems hesitant in calling the deteriorating mind state of the priest as mental or mad. This occurs due to the social and traditional restrictions owing to religious obligations that do not allow people to say anything unrespectable or indecent to a priest.

Firstly, the Old cotter at the supper comments the dislike for the father Flynn and his eerier attitude. This statement is proposed with the help of many pauses and gaps who seems to avoid calling him mad which is not acceptable for a catholic priest of the church but was completely aware of father's bizarre behaviour. No, I wouldn't say he was exactly but there was something queer... there was something uncanny about him." Other than this there are several occasions where the odd behaviour of the priest has been very subtly described by the various characters in the story, in the different situations. Thus, several elements of antinarratable can be recognized in the plot mainly through the event of father Flynn's death.



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The reaction of the young boy to the news of Father Flynn's death is analyzed several times through the different occasions. It marks the importance of the effect of this news on the boy as he was known to be quite attached with priest.

The same hesitation is being noted about the late Father by his own sisters. Father Flynn had two sisters and both of them had witnessed the deteriorating health of the priest day by day. At the same time they also noticed some queer changes in his behaviour which by no mean can be called normal. Both the sisters also confessed that because of this the priest was unable to perform his duties towards the church properly. They both probably have already guessed that queerness in his behaviour is more than a health issue but religious restrictions checked them from saying it. But it was that chalice he broke that was the beginning of it. Of course, they say it was all right, that it contained nothing, I mean. But still... They say it was the boy's fault. (Joyce 13)

Joyce has left many gaps and pauses in the narration of the speaker that obviously stands for many unspoken words. These statements that he has unnarrated are giving rise to a different meaning to the situation. These half or unnarrated statements might be left intentionally to give space to the readers own imagination or to avoid saying on something that falls in the category of socially inhibited domain called antinarratable.

Although no visible elements of thrill and suspense are presented in the plot but the manner of narration impels us to feel the ambience of menace in setting of the story. The climax uncovers the narrators visit to the funeral house to pay his final tribute to the Father Flynn for the last time. There he finds this shocking and unbelievable information on the priest that he was growing weird.

The narrative of this emotional state of the boy is described in the continuous flow of thoughts that are running in the mind of the boy thus; it comes out as a wonderful amalgamation of stream of consciousness along with the description of the events as the story progresses. By locating the presence of disnarrated and unnarrated elements in the narrative of James Joyce this hence, becomes proved that he was a modernist far ahead of his own time and age.

In this process the narrator has intentionally narrated some of the events and checked himself from narrating some which eventually highlights the suspense and keep up the state

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of excitement. What the narrator chooses to narrate and inform us is explicitly there but what he holds back or eliminates is very exclusive to develop the hidden meaning of the text.

These events are chosen due to the difference in the threshold of narratability of narration. The fact that father Flynn's unstable condition is something not clearly revealed in the full course of the story either due to the sensibility of the young boy or and to hype the suspense in the story. We also can identify it as a religious restriction to check one from calling a priest as unstable or mentally ill.

Joyce's style of storytelling shows the mental complexities of his characters and what they are going through with great ease. In the process of analysis, the speaker narrates many events which increase the complex constellations of belief, values, emotions and intentions required to understand the true essence of the trauma the character is facing.

Thus, an emphasis needs to be laid on the text itself from the perspective of unnarration and disnarration that emerges as an innovative narrative technique with which James Joyce surpasses his contemporaries. And applying the technique of unnarratable and disnarratable emerges as a more comprehensive view that opens the texts complexities involved. The concept of narrated, unnarrated and disnarrated allowed us to look at the different forms of telling beyond the present and absent in the story, thus provides a better insight to experience Joyce's narrative world.

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