The Shorter Works
Father Flynn’s confessional mirth has been the subject of critical speculation for as long as I can remember. It’s one of those ambiguous questions that we all decide really can’t be explicitly answered because to do so would somehow invalidate the universal ambiguity of modern literature, life, or whatever existentialism the modern age glories in suffering. Whatever “something” that they decide has gone wrong with him, we smugly suppose is what is wrong with them. They can’t see it because they have been conditioned not to, while we, possessing post-Reaganite insight, know that the undefinable has the only chance at providing meaning. In this brief essay I am not going to try to change that thinking, but simply to reorder it, and to provide a new structure for the formless hopelessness that confronts the characters of these short stories. Since our panel topic dealt with competing groups of three, and the number didn’t do Dante any harm, I would like to propose that Joyce had a similar numerical affinity, one that was destined to lead him to outbursts of childish jealousy at Nora’s supposed affairs, and one that permeates all of the rivalries among his characters from Chamber Music to Finnegans Wake.

My reading will posit “The Sisters” as the introduction to the entire collection, with Flynn as a spiritual Cassandra, or an ecclesiastical Nestor, his laughter in the confessional stemming from his insight into the entrapped lives of the characters who grace the ensuing pages of the volume. His position as an annointed representative of the church is a constant reminder that the problems of Dublin’s citizenry originate with their inescapable bondage to Irish Roman Catholicism, which frames the parameters of their servitude and their isolation.

The three stories forming the initial bildungsroman sequence constitute
the growing awareness of the increasingly mature narrator(s). The first is a half-understood general lesson and a prediction of inescapable systematic bondage, the realization of which causes Flynn himself to be reduced to an intellectual invalid in the eyes of the other priests and the sisters. The boy, rebellious but willing to learn the art of priesthood, verbal or religious, refuses to listen to the sage wisdom of the misguided populace (old Cotter and his female companions) just as he refuses to join in the ritual speeches for the dead and to take cookie communions and the like, but is instead reminded of a three-word catechistic explanation for the experiences of the living: paralysis, simony, and gnomon, a formula for the crowd in limbo who populate *Dubliners*. They are caught in the simoniac implications of doctrinal corruption that produce a grubby, meretricious society, paralyzed physically and psychologically by poverty, inaction, and religious sanction, and they sell the freedom of their lives and souls for survival even while they compete in hopeless and misguided three-way rivalries for what meager crumbs of existence remain.

The third term of the structural blueprint the boy introduces for *Dubliners*, gnomon, resembles Joyce's introduction of the word *parallax* in *Ulysses* to explain the multiplicity of images for the same object, a kind of physical-science consubstantality in which the objects seen are both single and multiple, depending on their situation in regard to the observer. Gnomon is the shell of a parallelogram left when an equally proportioned part of it is removed. Its identity depends upon the presence of absence of the removed segment, and it is defined physically and spatially by its loss. The absence of the defining segment is nowhere clearer than in the defining presence of Michael Furey's absence in "The Dead," but it is also the vital missing segment in every one of the *Dubliner's* stories, the geometrical equivalent of the Holy Ghost in the Trinitarian view of completeness.

Let us apply this trinity of terms to the three-sided rivalries of the individual stories. The rivalry between Cotter and Flynn for the boy's soul is mitigated by the Flynn sisters' simpminded devotion and subservience. They are the living dead, good-hearted, obedient, and accepting. Old Cotter, rebellious enough to challenge the motives and authority of a member of the clergy, speaks for prudence and the unexamined, the acceptance of another, socially acceptable, paralysis of development. Flynn, in his own way, opens the gates to doubt, even as he gleefully goes through the artificial minutia of catechistic interpretation, the very embellishments that establish the authority of the church. We take what comfort we can in the boy's refusal of the cream-cracker communion, but are left with only the sense of the boy's service in providing a measure of absolution to Flynn as the priest's own confessor. Is Flynn's sense of guilt the legacy he leaves both to the boy and the Dubliners who follow? The boy is still far from being free from his bondage to the all-enveloping church; he is merely playing an unaccustomed role, but one that will take hold and eventually characterize Stephen Dedalus and Shem in later works.
"An Encounter" will focus on the “unnatural” aspects of Flynn’s surrogate, the Old Josser, as he engages in a rivalry over the boy—resumed from the first story—between Flynn/Josser’s exotic otherness and the socially accepted, healthy, young, brainless normalcy of boyhood in the person of Mahony. The narrator’s recognition of his own similarities to the Old Josser are frightening enough to drive the boy to Mahony for momentary comfort and the final recognition that intellectual freedom may well bring abhorant deviation. To be different or other implies risks that almost make paralysis welcome. The gnomon-shadow of the priest, the presence of his absence, like an obscene Holy Ghost, hangs over the spiritual journey to light, as the implications of the boy’s wish for difference are made manifest in the concluding epiphany.

Flynn is reincarnated again in his surrogate’s picture hanging on the wall, as the spiritual journey takes on the sexual overtones of a courtly love grail search in “Araby.” The boy envelops his journeys through Dublin’s shops and finally the fair itself in ecclesiastical terminology as he projects his quest in religious rather than sexual terms. His “praying hands” murmuring cast Mangan’s sister as a Blessed Virgin Mary image, but his brief discussion with the attendant girl at the stall, crudely mirroring the confessional with her coquettish interchange (“But you did.” “But I didn’t”) with the young Englishmen, deflates the sacredness of the boy’s own sexual aspirations. The rivalry here is again with the world of the normal, the ardent young men whose approach is profane rather than sacred. Faced with the impossibility of his quest in monetary terms and in his devalued dreams, the boy clinks his remaining coins together and is reminded of the simoniac counting of collection coins after the service as he makes another involuntary surrender of his childish fantasies to the realities of simony and paralysis.

The life of abused drudge providing for her drunken father and the comic-opera fantasy life of freedom as a bohemian girl/Cinderella in Argentina offered by Frank are presented as the only alternatives in their rivalry for Eveline. The grim socially acceptable norm of spinster-daughter, for all its impending paralysis, is more an inescapable religious legacy than a viable choice. A romantic elopement seems to represent an alternative to a full-blown Dublin wedding with parental consent, the publishing of the banns, and so on, but the risk in going with Frank is that he might not marry her at all, and perhaps she would have to live in a spiritual hell even more confining than the one she would have to abandon in Dublin. Frank’s last vision of Eveline as a caged animal contrasts with hers as a helpless drowning victim, paralyzed either way.

"After the Race" is a simoniac’s dream come true. The prevalent metaphoric motif is money, mentioned over and over again in terms of commerce and the totem-animal imagery of the pagans. Betrayal of country by the elder Doyle, whose trade with the RIC stifled his Nationalistic zeal, is coupled with his firm belief that France and its cars will provide the monetary salvation of Ireland. As Jimmy loses heavily in a Nationalistic game, way beyond his means,
Joyce extends his vision of paralysis to the middle classes and their pig-pushing merchant princes.

To remain single and sexually active in Dublin is, however, nearly as hard as either married victimization or spinstership. The rivals of “Two Gallants,” the slavey and Lenehan, vie for the affection of the walking phallus, Corley. The principal irony here is not the seduction of a slavey or its metaphorical counterpart in the monetary abuse of the female figure carved on the Irish harp, so much as the trick of lulling the reader into thinking that the climax of the story was to be a sexual one rather than a divine revelation in terms of the all-prevailing simony of Dublin’s lovers. The crucifixion and betrayal metaphors at the end of the story turn Corley into a sexual suffering servant giving his body to provide a gold coin for his betraying disciple. No wonder Flynn found the whole business so funny.

Not all Dubliners operate against the prevailing religious grain. The rivalry between Doran and Mrs. Mooney regarding Polly is based on a set of ecclesiastical standards as unequivocal as a chop from the family butcher’s ax. With guilt reinforced by confession and priestly admonishment, as well as Jack’s fists, Doran sees through his steamed glasses darkly. The game is again money, the profaning of sacred rights for the top dollar—marriage. Mrs. Mooney is in many respects the ideal Dubliner, at home and comforted by her religion, just as she observes its dictates. Is there any question that she will make short twelve at Marlboro Street? Doran’s fondest wish might well have been for precoital paralysis, something that never appeared in Mrs. Mooney’s Tarot deck.

Little Chandler’s rivals are two: Ignatius Gallaher and Chandler’s son, Little Little Chandler. Together Gallaher and the infant form an axis to keep the dreamer in his literary and social place. While Gallaher’s reputed triumph with assorted women in the fleshpots of the Continent apparently assures him a higher graduation place in the university of life, the child’s wailing is superior to his father’s self-pitying helplessness in the competition for baby-of-the-year demands for attention. Never one to leave any religious rock unturned, Joyce paints Annie’s picture as a perverse little madonna, whose devotion is to the divine child rather than her husband, a forgotten cuckold in his own carpentry shop.

“Counterparts” explores a series of ménage à trois rivalry situations between Farrington and Mr. Alleyne, Farrington and Weathers, and Farrington and his son. The female components of each vary from Mrs. Delacourt in the office, through the exotic English woman in the bar, to that old staple, the BVM, at home. Farrington is always competing at a disadvantage: in the inferiority of his office position, in his aging muscles in the bar, and in his bullying unchristian behavior at home. While Farrington’s principal weakness lies in his need for liquor, the wrath of the whole church establishment is summoned up against him in the boy’s pleas at home. Alleyne’s Protestant superiority, Weathers’s English strength, and the BVM’s ecclesiastical muscle all
outweigh anything Farrington's wrath can produce. The absence of meaningful psychological or physical strength forms the gnomon of this paralysis of meaningful action, supported by the grubby world of the legal scrivener and interspersed with shops sporting snugs for surreptitious daytime drinking.

The triangular symmetry of the three bowls with ring, prayerbook, and water—all representing rival career choices for Maria in "Clay"—is disturbed by the addition of a fourth bowl, containing clay, by the next-door girls. Even though they were responsible for organizing the games, the next-door youngsters were playing with far more realistic rules than those appropriate to sweet, aging virgins on All Hallows Eve. In many ways the opposite of the self-centered and self-pitying Duffy of the next story, Maria's obliviousness to her own grim situation is her ultimate defense. If she chooses death's symbol, she merely understands that "it was wrong that time and so she had to do it over again." Her fantasy rivals for her affections—the tipsy gentleman in the tram and the knights on bended knee in her song—replace the absence of any real ones in her DisneyWorld of sweetness and light, music, and nostalgia. It's a small world after all, as Joe tearfully realizes while he searches for the corkscrew.

The lack of any emotional rival to Mrs. Sinico's unsolicited affections is the basis of Mr. Duffy's spiritually and emotionally impoverished dilemma. Duffy's life in suspiciously monklike surroundings is underscored by his substitution of an anticlerical, self-aggrandizing version of socialism for religious devotion. His antisexual beliefs are the dissenting counterpart of the holy orders followed by his rivals in the church. The newspaper article is itself little more than a creed of disavowal of blame for the social order embodied in the railroad and the legal system in general. The irony of "no blame attaching[ing] to anyone" is that the testimony was rigged to fault Mrs. Sinico's intemperance for her own demise, while Duffy's lengthy epiphany on reading the story is an extended ego trip in which he attaches the blame for her bibulous habits on his own fatal attraction for and subsequent rejection of her, even though two years passed between their association and the beginning of Mrs. Sinico's drinking. The grubbiness of Duffy's self-blame is rivaled only by the cupidity of a railway that claims she had been hit and dragged fifty feet by a train that had started from a dead stop at Sydney Parade Station, and was "brought . . . to rest" "a second or two afterwards," according to James Lennon, the engineer. The story concludes with Duffy's going through a brief period of self-incrimination until he finally arrives at self-pity. The connection of the story to the church is that it is an allegory of the perversity of sexual denial. Sinico's fleeting gesture, which so horrified Duffy, is compounded by the furtive lovers by the Magazine wall. No Zarathustrian feats of rationalization can counter the phalluslike train-worm laboriously winding its way down the track with its little light blinking into the twin darknesses of the vagina and death.

"Ivy Day in the Committee Room" is built upon the gnomonlike presence of Parnell's absence. His defeat and death at the hands of his simoniac associates
informs the entire rainy afternoon in the committee room like the one where Parnell’s downfall was earlier brought about. The clergy’s surreptitious role in the Chief’s demise takes the form of the dark figure of Father Keon, neither clergyman nor layman, there to meet the candidate on a little item of “business.” The deferential attitude of the assembled political hacks underscores not only the role of the clergy in affairs in which they have no business but their influence on the denunciation of Parnell, whose redeeming value to the canvassers lies in his memory, soon dismissed if not forgotten. Their allegiance to the candidate and the Crown is easily bought with a few bottles of stout and the hollow promise of something more.

In “A Mother” Mrs. Kearney’s rivalry with Hoppy Holohan over the musical services of her daughter, Kathleen, introduces simony to the performing arts and the arts into the service of the country. When Kathleen—who has not, after all, played for the number of performances that constituted the original bargain—insists on taking her full contractual award, she is theoretically impoverishing the Eire Abu Society by her meretriciousness while at the same time she degrades her art, at least in the eyes of Holohan, whose appeal for a final verdict goes not to the clergy but to the third estate’s spokesman for the social order, O’Madden Burke, leaning on his augur’s staff/umbrella. His final verdict in matters artistic (in which he has no credentials whatsoever) recapitulates the judgment of his counterpart, Crofton—equally unqualified in literary criticism—who bestows the final half-hearted approbation of Hynes’s poem in “Ivy Day in the Committee Room.”

“Grace,” the original conclusion to *Dubliners*, is just the stuff that would have tickled Father Flynn’s funny bone in the confessional. Kernan’s trip to Paradiso, begun on the floor of the men’s cellar-lavatory, is a journey through ecclesiastical misconception, in the company of a group of hard-drinking but devout comforters, to the illuminating hilarity of Purdon’s misreading of holy scripture. Purdon’s twisted Jesuitical logic equates the falsified books of the assembled mammonites to a spiritual accounting in which all the accounts are either balanced or are just about to be, the whole an exercise in simoniac comfort if there ever was one. Invoking in the words of Jesus, whose absence is hardly present, the church’s rationalization for the bibulous spiritual impoverishment of Dublin, Purdon conveys the peaceful blessing of the church on the wasteland it has created.

The rivalry between Gabriel and Michael Furey for the love and soul of Gretta concludes the final story, which is fraught with all of the rivalries present in *Dubliners*. Three women vie for the role of most-likely-to-produce-flacidity: Lily, the abused servant; Miss Ivors, the nationalistic nag; and Gretta, whose all-encompassing fount of favors has been chilled by the snow and freezing rain fallen years before on Rahoon and now present all over Ireland. Gabriel’s picturesque construction of the precipitation falling everywhere in this world and the next, which provides the book’s concluding
metaphor, turns emotional pain into artistic beauty and a country of misplaced allegiances into a puddle of sacrifice. Flynn’s sisters come back to us as Gabriel’s aunts, still devout but angered by the church’s sexual misappropriation of their musical art, their talents no longer welcomed in the service of the church. The monks, who retire to coffins every evening—a walking-dead metaphor in their shuttle back and forth between life and death—prefigure the passion of Michael Furey, who died because the object of his love must go away to serve her convent penance. Gabriel, his limp upper fallen, has the life-sustaining artistic ability to turn his lament for his own unfulfilled condition into an ambiguous if pious linking of his rival’s emotion with the peaceful serenity of falling snow, joining the dead with the living in a country inhabited by spirits shuffling between two worlds. It is Gabriel’s self-proclaimed generosity and Joyce’s genius for ambiguity that admit these concluding hints of redemption and peace to a most distressful condition depicted in Dubliners.