An Encounter

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JAMES JOYCE

James Joyce was born into a well-off Catholic family in Dublin in 1882, the eldest of ten surviving children. But his father lost his job and began drinking heavily when Joyce was around ten, and the family sank into poverty, moving and changing schools often. With his father's connections, Joyce still managed to eventually attend Belvedere College, one of the best Jesuit schools in Dublin, and his Catholic education left him torn between his feeling that the Church repressed him and his love for its thinkers, symbols, and tradition of intellectual rigor. Joyce attended University College Dublin, where he studied multiple languages, wrote plays and poetry, and published in Irish literary magazines. After graduation, he moved to Paris to study medicine but soon gave up, occasionally appealing to his family for money to support him despite their poverty. In 1903, he returned home to see his dying mother, but refused her dying wish that he make confession and take communion. From 1904 on, Joyce reworked details from his own life as well as wide-ranging thoughts about the state of Ireland, literature, and the human condition into *Dubliners* (1914), a collection of short stories, and the novels *A Portrait of the Artist as A Young Man* (1916), *Ulysses* (1922), and *Finnegans Wake* (1939). Joyce's writing was incredibly controversial, and was occasionally banned for obscenity, but had a major impact on the Modernist movement of the early 20th century. Just two years after the publication of *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce died after a surgery on a perforated ulcer in Germany in 1941.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"An Encounter" and the other stories in *Dubliners* take place in either late-19th- or early-20th-century Dublin. At that time, Irish Nationalism, the push for Ireland to resist English colonial rule to attain self-governance and economic independence was growing in influence. The conflict between England—a colonial world power—and Ireland—one of its many colonial holdings—defines the historical and cultural backdrop in "An Encounter." Catholicism was introduced to Ireland in the 5th century, and largely displaced the island's native religious practices. By the late 19th century it was considered to be the religion of the Irish people. Meanwhile, Protestantism came into Ireland along with English conquest, and Protestants were largely aligned with a pro-English political stance and were seen by the Catholic Irish as attempting to "Anglicize" or stamp out Irish culture. The communities of Catholic and Protestant Ireland were engaged in a complex power struggle—Protestants were backed by the English power that dominated Ireland, but Catholics held more social and cultural sway among the Irish. In "An Encounter," Joyce also draws parallels between the colonial struggle between the English and Irish and westward colonial expansion in the United States. The 19th century saw the U.S. military pushing west and violently displacing or killing indigenous people along the way. These two conflicts define the power dynamics in "An Encounter," which tie adventure to danger and cruelty and inform the social and political environment that the Irish characters of the story live in.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"An Encounter" is a short story in *Dubliners*, a collection of short stories about class, religion, and nationalism in Ireland in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. "An Encounter" shares a setting and some themes with many of the other short stories in *Dubliners*, but is particularly similar to the short story "Araby." Both feature a young, Irish male narrator seeking an "exotic" adventure, going on a journey, and having a coming-of-age experience marked by disappointment rather than triumph. "An Encounter" also makes reference to Homer's *Odyssey*: the narrator scans the sailors from a foreign ship to see if any of them have "green eyes." The protagonist of *The Odyssey*, the soldier and sailor Odysseus who epitomizes cunning, athleticism, and adventure, was known for having green eyes.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** An Encounter
- **When Written:** 1904-1905
- **Where Written:** Dublin and Paris
- **When Published:** 1914
- **Literary Period:** Modernist
- **Genre:** Short Story, Coming of Age
- **Setting:** Dublin, Ireland
- **Climax:** When the narrator stands up and walks away from the strange old man who seems vaguely threatening.
- **Antagonist:** In the abstract, the narrator struggles with his feelings of boredom from a repetitive daily routine. But he also meets a human antagonist: a strange old man that the narrator meets who appears to derive sexual pleasure from looking at young girls and beating young boys.
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Epiphanies: "An Encounter" and the other stories in *Dubliners* each contain what Joyce called an "epiphany:" a moment when

a character has a sudden realization or a moment of discovery. Often, these epiphanies are not positive. Instead, they describe the moment a character's hopes or expectations are dashed, or the moment a character fully grasps something negative about themselves, someone, or something around them.

Publishing Controversy: Like many of Joyce's novels and stories, "An Encounter" was the subject of controversy throughout *Dubliners*' publishing process. While Joyce signed a contract with the publisher of *Dubliners*, Grant Richards, in 1906, the collection was not published until 1914 because Joyce and Richards argued vehemently about how to edit each of the stories. Richards wanted Joyce to edit passages out of some stories to avoid potential libel or obscenity lawsuits. In fact, Joyce himself accidentally called Richards's attention to the "obscenity" in "An Encounter;" he pointed out that it was lewder than the stories that Richards took issue with, and Richards then requested that Joyce cut the whole story from the collection.

PLOT SUMMARY

"An Encounter" takes place in late-19th- or early-20th-century Dublin. The narrator, an unnamed, school-age young boy spends his evenings after school in an older boy named Joe Dillon's back garden playing war games based on the magazines about **the Wild West** that Joe likes. Every night, Joe leads a group of younger boys, including his little brother Leo and the narrator, in play reenactments of cowboy-and-Indian battles. Joe always plays as a Native American and, because he is bigger and plays rougher than the younger boys, always wins. The war dance that Joe performs to celebrate his victories is so wild and fierce that the narrator and everyone around him are shocked when Joe decides to follow the path to join the Catholic priesthood.

Without Joe to lead the war games, the boys keep trying to play without him, although the narrator knows that some of them—including himself—only play to prove that they are just as fierce as Joe. One day at the narrator's rigorous Catholic school, his teacher, Father Butler, catches Leo with one of the Wild West magazines and shames him in front of the class for reading it instead of focusing on his studies. Father Butler's rebuke makes Leo cry, and his swift punishment makes the narrator even less impressed by the Wild West.

Bored with his repetitive daily routine and longing for a "real" adventure, the narrator decides to play hooky the next day with Leo and another boy from school named Mahony—they play to cross the river to go visit a building called **the Pigeon House**. But the narrator's plan quickly starts to go wrong: Leo chickens out and doesn't show up, and Mahony gets into a scuffle with some ragged girls and ragged boys when he chases them with his **slingshot**. The poor children then throw stones at the narrator and Mahony and call them "swaddlers," pejorative slang for Protestants.

The two boys then cross the river on a ferryboat, and the narrator scans the crowd of foreign sailors to see if any have **green eyes** but is disappointed to find that none do. Watching the sailors only entertains the boys for so long before they grow tired, bored, hot, and hungry—more or less how they have felt for the entire journey. Mahony chases a cat into a field, and by the time they lay down to rest, they realize that they won't be able to go to the Pigeon House and make it home on time. They each stew silently in their disappointment before a strange old man with a walking-stick wanders into the field and greets them. At first, listening to the man talk is just another experience that bores the narrator. But then the strange old man hints at the sexual content in some of the books he loves. The hint goes over Mahony's head, and when he asks the man what he means, the man just smiles, revealing his decaying yellow teeth.

The strange old man starts to talk to the boys about "sweethearts," and while Mahony engages in conversation with him, the narrator mostly keeps quiet. The man keeps talking, his tone shifting as he describes how much he loves to look at young girls. As he repeats the same phrases to himself, the narrator gets the sense that the man is somehow "magnetised" by his own words. The narrator even finds himself somewhat hypnotized by the way the man speaks until the man suddenly stops and tells the boys he has to go for a moment. He walks off to the side of the field, presumably to masturbate, and while Mahony watches in shock and tries to get the narrator to look, too, the narrator only keeps his eyes focused on the ground.

When the man comes back, Mahony makes a break for it by chasing the same cat from earlier to the far end of the field. But the narrator seems stuck in place as the man starts talking to him again. Watching Mahony, the man repetitively describes his fantasies of "whipping" young boys. In his shock, the narrator "involuntarily" looks up at the man and comes face to face with his "bottle-green eyes." He waits out the man's speech, then tries to act casual as he stands up to leave. As he walks away from the strange old man he fears that the man will grab him. But he reaches the top of the hill without incident and calls out to Mahony, feeling ashamed of his own lack of bravery. When Mahony sprints across the field to the narrator as if he needed his help, the narrator regrets how he had always secretly "despised" Mahony a bit.

CHARACTERS

The narrator – A young, school-age boy who attends a rigorous Catholic school in Dublin, Ireland. His narration style is plain and sometimes even understated, reflecting his feelings of boredom with his dull routine and pretend adventures—as well

as his naivety about the real world. Although he participates in Joe Dillon's after-school war games inspired by stories about **the Wild West**, he isn't particularly athletic, and even prefers slower-paced American detective stories—and the beautiful women in them. After watching Leo Dillon get a stern rebuke at school for reading boys' magazines, the narrator loses interest in the Wild West but still longs for adventure. He plots to skip school one day with Leo and a boy named Mahony to walk across Dublin to **the Pigeon House**, but Leo is a no-show and the journey turns out to be largely disappointing. While he looks for signs that they are on a real adventure, seeking out **green-eyed** sailors like Odysseus and keeping an eye out for excitement, he finds himself mostly bored watching other people's routines. When he meets the strange old man in the field, he initially finds him boring, too. But as the man tries to connect with him, first through books and next over how beautiful young girls are, the narrator grows increasingly uncomfortable. Too paralyzed to run away, he sits quietly until the man starts talking about whipping young boys. The narrator's reaction to the strange man is far from heroic: he waits until the man finishes talking, then stands up and walks away, fighting down his terror, and calls Mahony to his side. As Mahony sprints to help him, the narrator comes to terms with his disappointed expectations in himself and in adventures—and feels remorseful for always secretly disliking Mahony.

The strange old man – The strange old man wanders into the field where the narrator and Mahony lay down to rest. At first he seems harmless, boring the boys with his talk about his school days and the weather. But when he turns to the books he read when he was younger and the narrator acts like he has read them, too, the man tries to connect with the narrator. He first highlights the difference between the bookish narrator and the athletic Mahony before hinting at the sexual content in some of his favorite books and pushing the boys to talk about how many "sweethearts" they have. As his questions and comments get more invasive, and he describes how much he loves to look at young girls, the narrator's anxiety mounts. The narrator also notices how unusually repetitive the man's speech is, as if he is repeating words and phrases he has uttered many times before. When he leaves the boys for a moment, presumably to masturbate, Mahony looks on in shock while the narrator can't even bring himself to look. When the man returns, Mahony quickly evades talking to him by running off into a field, but the narrator finds himself paralyzed with fear and somewhat transfixed by the man's way of speaking. But when the man starts talking about how much he'd love to whip young boys, the narrator is so shocked that he looks at him and notes his **green eyes**—signaling that, really, adventure is dangerous, strange, perverted, and frightening. When the narrator gets away from the man, he does so with a changed outlook on the world around him: everyone has a routine, and danger lurks in unexpected places.

Mahony – Mahony is one of the schoolboys that the narrator invites on his adventure across Dublin. He comes prepared for their journey with a slingshot and gets the adventure going when he decides that they ought to go on after Leo fails to appear. But he also starts trouble: he instigates conflict with the ragged girls by chasing them with his slingshot, prompting the nearby ragged boys to throw rocks at the narrator and himself and call them "swaddlers," derogatory slang for Protestants, because Mahony is wearing the badge of a cricket club in his hat. After he chases a cat into a field, they cross paths with the strange old man who creeps the boys out with his descriptions of looking at young girls. The man singles Mahony out as the more athletic of the adventuring duo, and while Mahony engages the man in conversation, the narrator keeps silent. Mahony later is bold enough to watch what the strange old man is doing—probably masturbating—in the field and makes an escape for himself by chasing the cat away from the old man. His rough-and-tumble attitude sparks the man's musings on whipping boys, and when the narrator calls to Mahony, he runs to him as if the narrator's life depends on it. Mahony's use of slang throughout "An Encounter" hints at the possibility that he might be lower-class—or at least less concerned about appearing to be lower-class—than the narrator himself. As the narrator's more athletic and more masculine foil, Mahony drives much of the action in the story and ultimately—and unwittingly—becomes its hero, much to the narrator's own dismay.

Joe Dillon – Joe Dillon is the older brother of one of the narrator's school friends, Leo Dillon. Joe collects boys' magazines for their stories about **the Wild West**. Every night after school, he leads a group of younger boys in war games based on cowboys-and-Indians battles. Donning a mock Native American costume, Joe plays rough with the younger boys and always wins, celebrating all his victories with a war dance that the narrator finds particularly fearsome. Joe's preference to play as a Native American and not a cowboy in the Wild West games suggests his, and the Irish people's, allegiance to "colonized" people rather than "colonizers"—especially since colonial American expansion had ramped up throughout the 19th century, the time just before "An Encounter" takes place. His victories even seem to rewrite history so that the colonized people come out on top. Joe becomes a kind of symbol of masculinity, individuality, and adventure to the narrator. When Joe is called to the priesthood, the narrator is shocked—the order and routine of the Catholic Church is so unlike how the narrator saw Joe at play. Joe's leadership and contradictory qualities infuse the story with its early spirit of adventure and set the narrator on his path to explore the unexpected contradictions in the people and places around him.

Leo Dillon – Leo is Joe Dillon's younger brother and one of the two boys from school that the narrator invites on his adventure across Dublin. Leo fights on Joe's side during the boys' after-

school war games, but the narrator is not particularly impressed with his athletic abilities, describing him as "fat" and "clumsy" and giving him the epithet "Leo the idler." One day at school, Father Butler singles Leo out during the class's Latin translation and catches him with one of the magazines about **the Wild West**. Father Butler confiscates the magazine and chews Leo out in front of the entire class for reading it instead of Roman History, shaming him for reading something beneath him as an "educated" boy and making him cry. After watching Leo punished in front of the whole class, the narrator loses much of his interest in the Wild West. The incident seems to leave Leo with a lasting fear of Father Butler; when the narrator invites him on his adventure to the **Pigeon House**, he is afraid that Father Butler will catch them. When he doesn't show up the next morning, the boys go on without him. His absence is the first thing that goes wrong on the journey, and the boys occasionally trash-talk him for abandoning them.

The Ragged Boys and Girls – At the beginning of their journey, Mahony and the narrator have a run-in with a group of "ragged girls" and "ragged boys," poor children who may be orphans. When Mahony chases the girls with his slingshot, the ragged boys throw rocks at the narrator and Mahony to defend the girls, and while Mahony wants to fight back, the narrator talks him out of it. When the narrator and Mahony move on, the whole "ragged troop" calls them "swaddlers," pejorative slang for Protestants, because Mahony has the badge of a cricket club in his hat. The poor children highlight the contrast between Mahony and the narrator's comfortable middle-class lives and the widespread poverty in Dublin in the late 19th century. The fact that the children think Mahony and the narrator are Protestants emphasizes how important the conflict between Catholics and Protestants is in Dublin at this time, even to its youngest inhabitants.

Father Butler – Father Butler is one of the teachers at the narrator's Catholic school. Mahony calls Father Butler "Bunsen Burner" because he is so quick to anger. Indeed, when he catches Leo Dillon with a copy of *The Halfpenny Marvel* one day during Latin translation, he confiscates the magazine and admonishes Leo for reading it instead of his Roman History. He then tells the boys that the author probably just writes to support his drinking habit and that the story is better suited for boys at National Schools—schools established by the British to educate Irish children, Catholic *and* Protestant, that was widely thought to have been the driving force behind the near-extinction of the Irish language and the overall Anglicization of the Irish people. Father Butler represents a certain kind of man and Catholic Irishness, with a focus on strict authority and rigorous intellectualism that is at the same time connected to a lack of mercy or caring.

Mr and Mrs Dillon – Mr and Mrs Dillon are Joe and Leo Dillon's parents. The narrator notes that Mr and Mrs Dillon piously attend eight o'clock mass every morning—an unusual amount of religious devotion even in late-19th-century Dublin—on Gardiner Street. To a reader who knows Dublin well, the detail that they go to Gardiner Street for mass communicates that the Dillons go to a Jesuit church (the Jesuits are an order of Catholics unique in their piety and in their social and intellectual pursuits). Attending a Jesuit church suggests that the Dillons may not only be going to be pious, but also to seek upward social mobility.

THEMES

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THE HERO'S JOURNEY AND DISAPPOINTMENT

The narrator of "An Encounter," an unnamed young boy, begins the story by describing the pretend, **Wild-West**-inspired "Indian battles" that he and his friends stage every day after school. But after a time, he gets bored of pretending and longs for a real adventure. He and two of his friends—Mahony and Leo Dillon—plan to skip school, cross the river, and seek out the true adventure he believes he could never get by staying home or at school. But despite his optimism, the plan quickly sours: Leo doesn't show; the narrator and Mahony get too tired to reach their destination; and finally, they encounter a strange man who won't stop talking about how much he loves to look at young girls and whip young boys. Faced with "real" adventure, the narrator finds himself more unsettled than emboldened by his brushes with danger and sexuality and feels a kind of churning disappointment as he fails to meet his own expectations of a hero. While "An Encounter" follows the typical structure of an adventure story, the gulf between the narrator's expectations and reality force him to accept that the kind of adventure he wants may not exist.

Joyce models the narrator's adventure across Dublin on the stereotypical hero's journey. "An Encounter" follows many typical adventure-story tropes: the narrator breaks from his boring routine and ventures from what he knows into the unknown, mirroring the stories of adventure and exploration he likely would have read in Wild West stories, the "American detective stories" he likes, and in epics like *The Odyssey*. Furthermore, Joyce breaks the narrator's journey into clear segments via multiple "threshold" crossings that move him from one phase of his journey to the next: first, his crossing of the Canal Bridge, next, his journey across the River Liffey by ferry, and finally his path through the alley and into the wide

field where he and Mahony meet the strange old man. Numerous small challenges test the narrator and Mahony along the way both individually and as adventuring partners: first, they must contend with Leo's absence; the ragged boys and girls throw stones at them and call them names; they face hunger and exhaustion; and finally, they realize that they have to abandon their hope of reaching their destination. These small challenges gear the boys up for contending with their biggest foe: the strange old man, who tests them more than anything else on their journey and ends up teaching them a lesson about adventure, routine, and the real world.

Throughout "An Encounter," Joyce provides a trail of hints that the narrator's expectations for his journey are much too high. First, the narrator's ideas about adventure are informed mostly by fiction: the Wild West stories Joe Dillon likes, the "American detective stories" he likes, and, Joyce implies, *The Odyssey*. With these models in mind, the narrator gets the idea that he must go "abroad" to have a "real" adventure—and as a result, the journey he plans across Dublin is too long and ambitious for young boys. By describing the geographic details of the narrator's journey—Canal Bridge to **the Pigeon House** and back, including multiple river-crossings—Joyce allows any reader familiar with Dublin to recognizes that the narrator proposed journey is too ambitious to pull off in the time allotted, particularly since he and Mahony dawdle along the way. The most concrete example of the narrator coming face to face with his disappointed expectations is when he and Mahony cross the Liffey: the narrator looks around hoping to spot a sailor who has "**green eyes**" like the Greek hero Odysseus does. Implicitly, Joyce suggests that the narrator is hoping that seeing an adventurer who matches the look of Odysseus will confirm that the narrator is on a "real" adventure. But, once again, the narrator is disappointed.

As the narrator's fiction-inspired expectations clash with reality, his overall feelings of shame and disappointment at the end of his journey mark his acceptance that real-world adventures are nothing like those in stories. The narrator must come face to face with hard truths about his abilities as a hero. Rather than lead his group according to plan, the narrator sees that his companions are out of his control: Leo doesn't even show up, and Mahony consistently sidetracks the duo by picking fights and chasing cats. And while the narrator wants to face his adventure with enthusiasm and bravery like the heroes in stories, he instead finds himself overwhelmed by the physical aspects of the journey and spends most of it tired and hungry. Although many of the stories the narrator reads about the Wild West involve exploring uncharted territory, his descriptions of industrialized Dublin reveal that there is actually no new territory to explore around him. Meanwhile, the threat that the narrator and Mahony face in the strange old man at the end of the story takes the narrator completely by surprise. He is almost taken in by the strange old man's tone and does not react to danger until it is almost too late. That the old man does in fact have green eyes hammers home that actual adventure is not like the "pretty" adventures of glory and success that the narrator imagines. It is just as likely to be strange, frightening, or even perverted. Further, in the end the narrator needs Mahony to come rescue him from the old man. The "accent of forced bravery" in the narrator's voice when he calls to Mahony characterizes the majority of his journey: when he tries to force adventure and act like his idea of a hero, he will only find disappointment.

Ultimately, the story ends with Mahony running to the narrator's aid and the narrator feeling ashamed of the fact that he had always despised Mahony a bit. As Mahony comes running, the narrator realizes that even after their unsuccessful day, Mahony has a bit of a heroic instinct that the narrator himself lacks. Adventures aren't what he imagined, and he is not the hero he hoped he might be.

MASCULINITY, SEXUALITY, AND COMING OF AGE

"An Encounter" features numerous older male characters with whom the narrator interacts. The male figures—the aggressive older boy Joe Dillon; the strict and haughty Father Butler at the narrator's Jesuit-run school; and the strange old man whom the narrator and his friend Mahony encounter while playing hooky from school—each provide different, and often confusing, models of masculinity and sexuality to the young male narrator of the story. The narrator's confusion at the visions of masculinity and sexuality that Joyce presents in "An Encounter" reveal how repressive attitudes about sexuality can make navigating coming of age as a young man difficult and even dangerous.

Joe Dillon's transformation from the leader of violent after-school war games to the priesthood makes him the narrator's first model for complex masculinity. At first glance, Joe fulfills the tropes of mainstream masculinity: loud, aggressive, a strong leader, and apparently invested in the themes of exploration, violence, and victory in **the Wild West** stories he likes so much. The narrator states that all the younger boys look up to Joe, so much so that even after Joe leaves, the boys keep playing the games he used to lead to prove that they were as bold and robust as he was. Joe's decision to go into the priesthood, though, is shocking to the narrator. The narrator's surprise seems to arise from his assumption that a wild and fierce boy like Joe couldn't possibly see any appeal in the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, which is notable for its order and discipline—and implicitly because Joe's "ideal" masculine sexuality would be partially suppressed in the priesthood since priests take a vow of celibacy. Joe's calling to the Catholic priesthood takes him from a masculine symbol for wildness and individuality that the other boys try to emulate into a cog in the mysterious and powerful machine of the Catholic Church,

subverting the narrator's earliest expectations for masculine power and suggesting, perhaps, that the Irish Catholic Church more broadly represses Irish masculinity.

However, while the narrator is confused by Joe's decision to go into the priesthood, the way Joyce describes Father Butler provides the reader with some insight into the directions that the priesthood channels masculinity. Textual details draw parallels between Joe and Father Butler: Mahony calls Father Butler "Bunsen Burner" for his quickness to anger, suggesting that within the order of Church, there is plenty of room for the kind of aggression that Joe demonstrated during his war games. But while Joe's example inspired "unruliness" in all the boys who looked up to him, Father Butler's rage only compels compliance. He uses his aggression to force the boys to do what he says and to reinforce his own ideas about order and hierarchy: Wild West stories are beneath "educated" boys, lower-class boys are beneath middle- and upper-class boys, and Protestants are beneath Catholics. When Father Butler's sudden rage towards Leo Dillon makes the Wild West appear comparatively dull to the narrator, Joyce suggests that the narrator sees some of the appeal in the power that comes from strict order, too. But when the narrator once again feels restless from the "restraining influence" of school, Joyce suggests that organized power is not as attractive to the narrator as the wildness that he saw in Joe.

The strange old man takes "wild" masculine sexuality to the extreme—in his case, it manifests as deviant masculine sexuality—and he most thoroughly confuses the narrator. At first, the strange old man seems like a normal, bookish, and slightly boring character. He talks about his schoolboy days, the weather, and books he likes. When the narrator acts like he is more well-read than he is, Joyce gives the reader the impression that the narrator wants to impress the old man and might possibly see him as a model of the kind of "studious" masculinity that the young boys were afraid to let show in front of someone like Joe. But when the strange old man starts hinting at sexual content in some of his favorite books, talking about "sweethearts," and describing how much he loves to look at young girls, the narrator is torn between his sense of the man's "reasonable" attitude about sweethearts and his unsettling manner of speaking about girls. As the strange old man works himself up and hypnotizes the narrator with his monotone speech about girls, the narrator seems almost frozen as the man goes off to masturbate. While Joyce does not give the reader much insight into the narrator's mind, the narrator is torn between walking away from the man and staying put.

Only once the strange old man comes back and his sexual perversions pivot to something more immediately threatening—his desire to "whip" young boys—does the narrator act. Despite the tone in the man's voice that makes the narrator want to "understand him," the narrator stands up and walks away calmly but filled with terror, decidedly leaving the old man and his ideas behind. The strange old man's version of masculine sexuality is certainly wild and violent like Joe's. But his perversions make him dangerous to the narrator and leaves the narrator more unsettled and confused than ever.

Joyce's attitudes about Catholicism underlying his representation of masculine sexuality in "An Encounter" reveal how difficult coming of age as a young man is for the narrator. At the end of the story, despite all the different kinds of men he encounters, the narrator still has no positive masculine role models. While Joe is the closest, his violence considered together with Father Butler's rage leads the reader to believe that the orderly Catholic system only channels masculine aggression in a negative way. Moreover, the narrator's understated narration style hints that while he might be more knowledgeable about sexuality than Mahony, he is still fairly naïve, and has no one to talk to about his confusing experiences. Meanwhile, the narrator's first direct conversation about sex is one that scares him and confuses him. Without a person to talk to about his confusion, his final fears hint towards the long road towards maturity he has ahead. The lack of any positive male role models in the story also more broadly implies that Ireland itself lacks any such role models—that the country is suffering a crisis of thwarted, misdirected, and even perverted masculinity.

ROUTINE AND REPETITION

Bored with his school routine and even the after-school war games that he plays with his friends, the narrator of "An Encounter" decides to shake up his repetitive life by skipping school for a day. He and his friends, Leo Dillon and Mahony, pool their money and plan to explore Dublin. But Leo bails on the trip and, while the narrator and Mahony start out excited, they soon find themselves outsiders looking in on others' daily routines or mirroring them: eating when other people eat and even copying others' facial expressions so as not to stand out. Even the most unusual thing that happens to them, their conversation with the old man who seems sexually fixated on looking at young girls and "whipping" young boys, makes the narrator think that he is just a part of the old man's routine because the man keeps repetitively circling back to the same language. The story's focus on repetition emphasizes that no matter how much the narrator tries to create adventure, what he hopes for is out of his reach: he is bound to fall into just another routine.

Descriptions of routine and repetition characterize the beginning of "An Encounter." The narrator opens the story by describing Joe Dillon's after-school war games. Even though the "Indian battles" mimic real adventure, the narrator makes clear that they are just another part of his dull routine by using language like "every night" and "never" to emphasize how rote the games are. Leo's attempts to translate Latin in front of the class is just another instance of repetition. He isn't requested to

think for himself or to make anything new, just to repeat what someone else has already written. The narrator's desire for escape into a "chronicle of disorder" encompasses his desire to break free from his everyday disciplined routine, leading him to plan his excursion into Dublin during school hours.

But even while the narrator and Mahony are on their adventure across Dublin, images of routine and repetition abound, gradually increasing as the story goes on. The first hint of others' routines comes when the narrator watches a "docile" horse carrying businesspeople up a hill in a cart. The horse is sometimes an image of wildness in **Wild West** stories. But this horse is placid and tame, sharing its daily routine with the businesspeople although the narrator hardly registers it. Later, when Mahony and the narrator cross the river, they notice that everyone around them is eating lunch and do the same, sitting down and watching the bustling construction around the river that makes up everyone else's routines. As they later watch a sailor entertain a crowd, the narrator finds himself growing bored since although the sight is novel to anyone who stops by and moves on, spending just a little time watching makes clear that the sailor is following a repeating routine, which soon gets dull.

Although the strange old man deviates from acceptable sexual attitudes, the narrator senses that he, too, relies on repetition and has a routine. As the man speaks about young girls' beauty, working himself up to masturbate, the narrator thinks that it seems like the man is "repeating something which he had learned by heart," connecting the man's words to the Latin recitation that Leo Dillon was supposed to have learned. The narrator's description of the man's repetitive speech suggests that while the experience is new to the narrator, it is routine for the strange old man. Once the strange old man's routine takes over the narrator's attempt at adventure, the narrator realizes that he is out of his depth: he is not at all practiced in dealing with danger, but the strange old man seems perfectly comfortable directing vague threats at the boys, a realization that is both unsettling and disappointing.

The narrator plans his adventure as a way to break out of the routine and repetition that dominates his school life, and he believes that in order to find that "adventure" all he has to do is go "abroad"—in his case, go out into the world away from school. But when he does go out into the world, all he finds is more repetition and routine of varying sorts. In this way, "An Encounter" seems to suggest that there is no longer any chance of adventure for the narrator, or in Ireland.

RELIGION, COLONIZATION, AND POWER

"An Encounter" takes place in Dublin, Ireland in the late 19th or early 20th century, when Ireland was still under British colonial control. British colonization exploited Ireland both politically and economically, and during Joyce's lifetime, debate surged over whether Ireland could—or should—attain self-rule. Though it does so subtly, "An Encounter" directly engages with the complicated Irish social dynamics around colonization and power. Joe Dillon reads **Wild West** stories and convinces his friends to pretend to be Native Americans, who were of course subject to increasing domination by the United States. The narrator's Catholic-school teacher shames his class by suggesting that they act like boys from the British-established, lower-class "National Schools" as opposed to the private, pro-Irish, Jesuit-run school that the boys attend; and a group of orphans on the street make fun of the narrator and his friend Mahony by calling them "swaddlers," a pejorative term for Protestants (pro-England Irish people were usually Protestants, as opposed to the pro-Irish Catholics). By foregrounding the boys' fascination with Native Americans and their fights for freedom, and by subtly including other instances of the manifestations of English colonial rule, "An Encounter" emphasizes colonization's impact on Joyce's characters and explores the complex and shifting social and cultural hierarchies in Ireland between Catholic and Protestant, rich and poor, and Irish and colonial English characters.

Joe Dillon's fascination with the Wild West draws parallels between Native Americans and the Irish as people subject to colonization. His desire to play as a Native American, not a cowboy, in his cowboys-and-Indians games shows his allegiance with a group of people who are under colonial rule, just as the Irish themselves are. Furthermore, his ferocity at play, and the detail that Joe's version of Native Americans always win, suggests that despite the long history of failed Irish rebellions, there are still Irish people who are fierce enough to lead and to break from the status quo against their oppressors. At the same time, the fact that Joe's victories are in a pretend game might be taken as suggesting that, in fact, the idea of such leaders is itself a fantasy.

When Joe decides to join the priesthood, the significance of his decision is complex. The Catholic Irish had long been at the forefront of attempts at rebellion against the Protestant English. However, at the end of the 19th century, the Catholic Church turned its back on Charles Stuart Parnell, Ireland's greatest diplomatic hope at attaining independence, after it was revealed that Parnell was engaged in an extra-marital affair. Many Irish people felt the Church had betrayed both Parnell and the Irish Nationalist cause, which makes Joe's decision to join the Church ambiguous, particularly in light of the way Joyce portrays the only other holy man in the story: the narrator's teacher, Father Butler.

Father Butler's rebuke of Leo Butler at school touches on numerous hierarchical beliefs about Catholics and Protestants in Ireland and represents how those beliefs get passed down through generations. First, Father Butler criticizes Leo Dillon

and the class at large for reading Wild West stories instead of the Roman History he assigned, suggesting that the stories are beneath them as "educated" boys in the Jesuit system and maintaining order. Furthermore, the reading Father Butler assigns, the Roman History, glorifies an empire—albeit the Roman Empire—and carries complex connotations about the place of the Catholic Church in Ireland: while the Catholic Church tends to side against the English politically, its connection to Roman imperial history makes it yet another force that enacts colonial power over Irish people. In the time of Irish Nationalism, the fact that the boys learn Latin in school but not their own dying Irish language also makes the Church's position in Irish independence ambiguous. As a part of Butler's public shaming of Leo, he also tells the boys that they are better than the boys in the National School, a British-established school designed to educate Catholics and Protestants together and a school which the Irish Catholic hierarchy thought was a force of cultural suppression. However, by reaffirming this hierarchy, Father Butler deepens the divisions between young Catholics and Protestants. Overall, Father Butler encourages conformity with the status quo, attempting to quash the beginnings of the same kind of rebellious spirit that Joe Dillon has and that, the story suggests, Ireland needs for its independence.

The narrator and Mahony's encounter with the "ragged troop" of boys and girls further reveals how prominent the cultural and class divisions between Irish-aligned Catholics and English-aligned Protestants are, even to the youngest people in Dublin. When Mahony chases the "ragged girls"—poor children who are likely orphans—with his **slingshot**, the story hints at the widespread poverty in Dublin and gives a glimpse at the kinds of children who probably attend the schools that Father Butler thinks are beneath his class. The "ragged boys" defend the girls from Mahony, and while Mahony and the narrator are both Catholics who attend a Jesuit school, the children call them "swaddlers," pejorative slang for Protestants, when they see a cricket club's badge in Mahony's hat. The children assume that since Mahony and the narrator are wealthier, and cricket fans, they must be English-aligned Protestants, highlighting how religious divisions also reflect class divisions in Dublin—though not necessarily the cultural hierarchy. The conflict between young children reveals how stuck Dublin is in its conflict. Even small children have a grasp of the hierarchies at play in their daily lives and continue sowing division among themselves.

PARALYSIS AND DECAY

Joyce believed that Catholic and English political interests vying for control of Ireland and the Irish people had left the country in a state of "paralysis" leading to an overall cultural decay. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, England's subjugation of Ireland left it an impoverished country financially and culturally: it's native language was dying, and it had endured famine and economic decline with little aid. Ireland possessed a long history of failed nationalist rebellions against the English, and the best hope for a diplomatic path to Irish "home rule," the Anglo-Irish Protestant politician Charles Stuart Parnell, had just been destroyed—when Parnell was discovered to have had an affair with a married woman, the Catholic hierarchy in Ireland abandoned their support for him, ending his political power and the hope for Irish self-rule along with it. While the references to paralysis and decay in "An Encounter" are subtle, the narrator's strict Catholic-school environment, his boredom, and, ultimately, his struggle to act to protect himself from the sexually perverted old man with the decaying teeth all point towards the environment of cultural decay and individual paralysis.

The narrator's boredom with his routine is the first kind of paralysis he experiences in "An Encounter." After Joe leaves for the priesthood, the narrator and the other boys keep playing Joe's games despite the fact that they don't have a leader and some of the boys don't even enjoy the games, hinting at the boys' difficulty in creating a new order for themselves. Furthermore, Father Butler's rebuke at school reveals how harshly the boys are reprimanded for even the smallest steps out of line, clueing the reader into the attitudes that make it so hard for the narrator and his friends to change their lives, and the way that even the institutions that might support the Irish cause are in practice more concerned with maintaining their own power. Even the language of the section of the story before the narrator's journey reinforces the idea of paralysis as the narrator describes his "reluctant" companions and "the restraining influence of the school."

On the journey across Dublin, the language in "An Encounter" points to the boys' experience of paralysis even as they attempt to break out of their routine. The narrator notices the "docile" horses and describes how he and Mahony are "shouted at" for their "immobility," and although they walk a long way from their starting place to Ringsend, they don't actually make it to their planned final destination and end up simply lying down in a field. When the old man enters the field and speaks to the narrator and Mahony, the narrator notes how the man's mind seems to be "magnetised" by his own words. Once the man starts on a subject, it is difficult to deter him from it—and even the narrator finds himself almost hypnotized by the way the man speaks despite his underlying feelings of discomfort. As soon as the old man's perversion is clear and the narrator realizes he is in danger, he still can't seem to bring himself to move or defend himself, instead staying frozen in place until the last possible second. While his escape might seem a departure from his usual paralysis, his sense of shame about his lack of bravery suggests that the narrator himself doesn't see it that way.

The details that Joyce includes about the narrator's Dublin

surroundings further point to the cultural, social, and economic decay that Joyce perceived in Modern Ireland. The "ragged" boys and girls that the narrator and Mahony encounter provide a window into the poverty that many residents of Dublin lived in at the turn of the 20th century, and Mahony's lack of sympathy for them points to the lack of responsibility wealthier Catholic Dubliners feel towards their poorer Catholic neighbors despite their religious commonalities. Even the background of the boy's hoped-for destination, **the Pigeon House**, supports the idea that Dublin is in decline. Once an Irish port, then an English military fort, and finally a sewage and power plant, the Pigeon House has gone from a symbol of Ireland's connection to the wider world, to a symbol of England's military oppression of Ireland, to a plant that literally processes waste and rot. Finally, the strange old man's appearance—his shabby suit, his "good" accent but perverted speech, and his mouth of decaying yellow teeth—invite the reader to draw parallels between the man and the wider culture. His body and his morals are all in a state of decay, and he seems trapped in his own routine, making the younger boys suffer for it. Meanwhile, the fact that the old man, who admires famous Irish writers, is himself perverted suggests that the culture itself has become similarly corrupted.

SYMBOLS

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

THE WILD WEST

The focus on the Wild West at the beginning of "An Encounter" frames the narrator's ambivalence towards adventure and masculinity. With its stories about battles and exploration, the Wild West contains the mystery, adventure, action, and heroism that the narrator desires. But while Joe Dillon seems to embody the violent, athletic, individualist masculinity that the stories about the Wild West celebrate, the narrator just doesn't enjoy Joe's war games very much. While the narrator wants adventure and escape from his daily life, he doesn't like the violence and chaos that seem to come with it. Indeed, when he and Mahony free themselves from the strictures of the school day by playing hooky, the narrator largely tries to avoid conflict. The potential danger that he and Mahony find themselves in when the **green-eyed** strange old man zeroes in on them is much more frightening than it is exciting, and the man's sexual perversions dwarf the boys' attempts at deviance from the social order, showing the dark side of violent, individualistic masculine sexuality.

Joe's performance as a Native American in the after-school cowboys-and-Indians games also highlights the connection between the Irish and the Native Americans as colonized people. While indigenous people in the United States had largely lost their battle against colonizing forces by the late 19th century, Joe's fighting spirit suggests that Irish people might still have a chance to resist their English oppressors—making his choice to go into the priesthood even more complex, since Joyce considered the Catholic Church another force that subjugated Irish people. Nonetheless, Joe's repeated triumph as the Native American in their pretend war games suggests an effort to rewrite history, in which the colonized people, such as the Irish, win. That these victories are only pretend, though, also suggests the degree to which Irish independence was also something of a fantasy at the time.

THE PIGEON HOUSE

When the narrator decides to skip school, he plans to go see the Pigeon House. The Pigeon house was a building whose history encompasses many different uses. That fact, along with the detail that he and Mahony don't actually make it to the Pigeon House, ties into Joyce's ideas about Irish cultural decay and paralysis. The Pigeon House started out as a lodging house for workers building Dublin's Great South Wall, then became a restaurant and hotel for travelers arriving in Dublin Bay. After the failed Irish Rebellion of 1798, the Pigeon House became a military fort for Anglo-Irish forces, before finally undergoing its final transformation into a sewage processing facility and power generating station. The Pigeon House's transformation from a port for foreign sailors—adventurers—to a sewage processing and power plant after a period of military takeover echoes Joyce's ideas about English colonization's impact on Ireland. If the narrator considered the Pigeon House a symbol for adventure, like the **green eyes** he hoped to find in the foreign sailors around him, and if he had actually completed his journey, he would have been greeted with a symbol of Irish decay: literal sewage.

However, the Pigeon House was also an electrical power plant. Considered in a positive light, the Pigeon House is also associated with light, and its name is associated with the Holy Spirit, which often appears as a dove in its physical form. These aspects of the Pigeon House invite the reader to wonder whether there might be hope for greater Irish renewal despite the narrator's personal failure and disappointment in his adventure.

GREEN EYES

The narrator looks to see whether anyone around him has green eyes to confirm whether or not he is on a "real" adventure. While much of the adventure imagery in "An Encounter" relates back to **the Wild West**, green eyes are likely a reference to Homer's *Odyssey*: Odysseus, the protagonist of *The Odyssey*, is a sailor, soldier, and adventurer as well as a prototype for the ideal masculine hero. The

narrator first mentions green eyes after crossing the River Liffey, scanning the faces of the foreign sailors around him to see if any have green eyes. When he is disappointed to find that none do, the implication is that his adventure is not living up to the lofty expectations for adventure that he has gleaned from books and epics.

He doesn't actually encounter anyone with green eyes until he meets the strange old man. However, the old man creeps the narrator out so much that he hardly looks at the man as he talks about beautiful young girls and goes off to the other end of the field to masturbate. The narrator then only notices that the man has green eyes after the man describes his shocking desire to whip young boys. Noticing the man's green eyes at the moment the narrator thinks he is completely out of his depth and possibly in danger drives home the idea that while "real" adventures does mark a departure from the dull daily routine, the adventure won't necessarily be wholesome or even heroic. It can instead be strange, disappointing, frightening, or even cruel or perverted.

THE CATAPULT (SLINGSHOT)

One of the things that sets the traditionally-masculine, athletic Mahony apart from the timid and studious narrator is Mahony's slingshot, or catapult. When Mahony first meets the narrator on the bridge before their journey, he reaches into his "inner pocket" and pulls out the slingshot that visibly "bulged" from it, giving it phallic associations. While the slingshot certainly seems to drive the kind of aggressive masculine behavior that Joe Dillon demonstrates—Mahony brings it to shoot defenseless birds along the way and uses it to chase the ragged girls—it doesn't feature again during the story. Mahony doesn't pull it out to defend himself and the narrator from the strange old man, who vaguely threatens them by describing how much pleasure he apparently derives from beating young boys. As a symbol of masculinity, the slingshot certainly distinguishes Mahony from the narrator. But since Mahony doesn't use it for any practical purpose, even when he and the narrator are in danger, the reader is invited to wonder what its purpose is—or should be. In the Bible, the slingshot is the young hero David's weapon used to bring down the powerful Goliath. But in "An Encounter," the boys don't use the slingshot at all when it counts, which suggests that the kind of heroism they were after is beyond them, or perhaps no longer possible at all.

QUOTES

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

An Encounter Quotes

It was Joe Dillon who introduced the Wild West to us… Every evening after school we met in his back garden and arranged Indian battles. He and his fat young brother Leo, the idler, held the loft of the stable while we tried to carry it by storm; or we fought a pitched battle on the grass. But, however well we fought, we never won siege or battle and all our bouts ended with Joe Dillon's war dance of victory.

Related Characters: The narrator (speaker), Joe Dillon, Leo Dillon

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

This passage at the beginning of "An Encounter" provides context for the story's first major symbol: the Wild West. In Dublin at the turn of the 20th century, Irish Nationalism—the Irish effort to gain political and economic independence from England—dominated the political conversation. By describing Joe Dillon's interest in the Wild West, particularly his interest in Native Americans and *not* in cowboys, Joyce invites the reader to compare the struggles indigenous people in the United States faced throughout the 19th century with the Irish struggle for independence. Both groups had fought mostly losing battles against their colonizers, but Joe's repeated victories serve as a fictional rewriting of history. Considered together with Irish Nationalist independence efforts, Joe's alignment with Native Americans hints at the possibility that a younger generation of Irish people might have the fighting spirit to finally triumph over the English.

The quote also establishes the story's themes of thwarted adventure and constant routine. While the Wild West calls to mind a sense of adventure, exploration, and lawlessness, the narrator's language characterizes the Wild West games as just a part of his—and others'—regimented daily routines. The boys' ideas about the Wild West, are largely based in fiction: Joe's victories do not reflect the 19th century reality of the Wild West, and rather than embark upon a real adventure, the boys only pretend to explore and battle. The reader can sense the tedium that the narrator feels with this routine in his language, particularly "every night," "every morning," and "never." Every loss, for the narrator, is just as boring and disappointing as another.

The fact that Joe wins every battle contributes to the

narrator's sense of the games' tedium. But since Joe is older, he serves as one of the narrator's first role models for how to be masculine. Joe's masculinity is aggressive and wild, complicating the implications of the fact that he plays as a Native American. While his victories are fictional "wins" for colonized people, they also reinforce how violent and aggressive masculinity tends to attack and dominate the vulnerable.

> His parents went to eight-o'clock mass every morning in Gardiner Street and the peaceful odour of Mrs Dillon was prevalent in the hall of the house.

Related Characters: The narrator (speaker), Joe Dillon, Mr and Mrs Dillon

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears in "An Encounter" just after the passage that describes Joe Dillon's Wild West games. Not only does this passage contrast Joe with his parents, drawing distinctions between different generations of Dubliners, the narrator's description of Mr and Mrs Dillon's morning church routine invites the reader to compare the order that the Catholic Church establishes and enforces upon the Irish people at large with the order that the survival-of-the-fittest Wild West games establish and enforce upon the boys. In both cases, the more powerful—the wealthier or more pious in Mr and Mrs Dillon's case, or the stronger or more aggressive in the boys' case—come out on top. And in both cases, the weaker are trapped in their subservient position.

The detail that the Dillons attend a church on Gardiner Street every morning also clues readers in on two key pieces of information: first, the Dillons' religious devotion appears to be extreme, even for turn-of-the-20th-century Dublin. And second, they attend a Jesuit church. Since the Jesuits were the most socially and culturally revered order of Catholics, the Dillons' religious practice hints at their social ambitions—they're religious devotion is also a way to move up the social ladder. When it is later revealed in the story that Joe Dillon decides to join the priesthood, this context is important, as Joe's choice can also be seen as connected to the family's social ambitions, and as illustrating the Catholic Church's position as a force for maintaining the social hierarchy and the powerful as opposed to supporting and protecting the weak and vulnerable.

> A spirit of unruliness diffused itself among us and, under its influence, differences of culture and constitution were waived. We banded ourselves together, some boldly, some in jest and some almost in fear: and of the number of these latter, the reluctant Indians who were afraid to seem studious or lacking in robustness, I was one. The adventures related in the literature of the Wild West were remote from my nature but, at least, they opened doors of escape.

Related Characters: The narrator (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator distinguishes himself from the other boys who play the Wild West games. He demonstrates that there are different kinds of masculinity at work, the "bold" boys who continue Joe Dillon's games after he leaves to go into the priesthood, the boys who play "in jest" and can find a sense of humor in the violent games, and the boys, like the narrator, who play "in fear" of being discovered not to like violent games. While the narrator highlights that there are different kinds of masculinity at work around him, he makes clear that rather than see that variety around him, all the boys simply copy Joe Dillon's version of masculinity.

However, all the boys have in common the desire for change, the "spirit of unruliness" that the narrator describes. The narrator attributes his participation in the games, in large part, to his desire for adventure and escape: escape from routine and adventure into the unknown. Since the narrator does not actually enjoy the games, they occupy a complex position in his daily life: on the one hand, they give him a taste of the adventure and "unruliness" he wants. But on the other hand, he knows that they are not real adventures, that he is not really himself when he mimics boys like Joe, and that they are just another facet of his routine.

Everyone's heart palpitated as Leo Dillon handed up the paper and everyone assumed an innocent face. Father Butler turned over the pages, frowning.

"What is this rubbish?" he said. "*The Apache Chief!* Is this what you read instead of studying your Roman History? Let me not find any more of this wretched stuff in this college. The man who wrote it, I suppose, was some wretched scribbler that writes these things for a drink. I'm surprised at boys like you, educated, reading such stuff. I could understand it if you were… National School boys. Now, Dillon, I advise you strongly, get at your work or…"

This rebuke during the sober hours of school paled much of the glory of the Wild West for me and the confused puffy face of Leo Dillon awakened one of my consciences.

Related Characters: The narrator, Father Butler (speaker), Leo Dillon

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Father Butler discovers an adventure magazine in Leo Dillon's pocket at school. By shaming Leo in front of the class, Father Butler demonstrates that ways that Joe Dillon's aggressive masculinity might be channeled into the priesthood: while Joe's leadership and aggression encouraged the other boys to be aggressive and wild, Father Butler's similar traits are used to frighten his students into obedience. The fact that Father Butler's rebuke makes the Wild West seem less appealing to the narrator and makes Leo cry makes this passage one of the key moments in which the narrator feels disappointed that the kind of adventure he longs for may not exist and, if it does, might be discouraged. In this moment, the power that the Wild West holds over the narrator's imagination pales before the power of the Catholic Church, and suggests the way that the Church functions in Ireland to suppress such adventuring instincts.

Moreover, when Father Butler shames Leo and his class by putting down the state-sponsored, multifaith National School, he plays on and exacerbates the existing divisions between rich and poor and Catholic and Protestant in Ireland. The English established the National Schools to educate poor children in Ireland who could not afford to attend schools like the expensive Catholics school the narrator attends in "An Encounter." But since these schools were English-run, designed to educate Catholics and Protestants together, they were looked down on by middle- and upper-class Irish people and seen as an attempt to suppress and destroy true Irish culture. What complicates these viewpoints of the Irish Catholic elite is that they had some truth to them. Through Father Butler's rebuke of Leo, the story gets to the heart of all the conflicts in Ireland—religious, class, and cultural—at the turn of the 20th century.

Finally, the fact that Father Butler is angry at Leo for reading adventure magazines instead of Roman History illuminates the Catholic Church's role in the colonization and paralysis of the Irish people that James Joyce saw around him. The Roman History glorifies an empire much like the English—and, in fact, the Romans were the first to colonize Ireland and convert its people from their native religions to Christianity. By learning Latin, a dead language and the language of the Church, the wealthier Irish boys still do not learn their own Irish language nor do they learn any explicitly anticolonial material in school, making the Church complicit in the way Ireland seems stuck in time and stuck under colonial rule.

But when the restraining influence of the school was at a distance I began to hunger again for wild sensations, for the escape which those chronicles of disorder alone seemed to offer me. The mimic warfare of the evening became at last as wearisome to me as the routine of school in the morning because I wanted real adventures to happen to myself. But real adventures, I reflected, do not happen to people who remain at home: they must be sought abroad.

The summer holidays were near at hand when I made up my mind to break out of the weariness of school-life for one day at least.

Related Characters: The narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

This passage highlights how despite Father Butler's efforts, the narrator has not completely had his desire for adventure stamped out. In fact, school seems to stoke his interest in adventure stories as "chronicles of disorder" that directly oppose the order of the Catholic Church that Father Butler enforces.

However, the narrator distinguishes between the real adventures he reads about and the pretend adventures he and his friends go on every night. While the stories make clear that adventures are a departure from routine, the children's games have just become part of the narrator's routine. To feel like he is on a real adventure, the narrator will have to cast school aside and plan something new for a change.

And yet, the fact that the narrator is basing his ideas about what constitutes a real adventure on what he reads in fiction is a subtle sign that his understanding of "real" adventure is itself faulty, and unlikely to survive when he actually attempts to embark on such an adventure.

With Leo Dillon and a boy named Mahony I planned a day's miching. Each of us saved up sixpence. We were to meet at ten in the morning on the Canal Bridge…We arranged to go along the Wharf Road until we came to the ships, then to cross in the ferryboat and walk out to see the Pigeon House. Leo Dillon was afraid we might meet Father Butler or someone out of the college; but Mahony asked, very sensibly, what would Father Butler be doing out at the Pigeon House.

Related Characters: The narrator, Mahony (speaker), Leo Dillon, Father Butler

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator's planned "miching," or skipping school, fulfills his desire to break free from the routine and authority that he feels himself stuck in. It's significant that his planned journey mimics those in many adventure stories with its crossing of both land and water. But anyone familiar with Dublin's geography would know that the journey he plans is long, convoluted, and ambitious for three school boys to undertake within the course of a single day. The story constantly finds ways to have the planned adventure mirror the contours of a fictional adventure, while hinting at its failure in the real world.

Moreover, Leo Dillon's hesitancy to break the rules hints at the possibility that the journey might be a bad idea, and reveals that Father Butler's punishment worked on him: he is so afraid of Father Butler that he thinks, irrationally, that he might catch them at their destination. Although Mahony assuages his fears, the narrator's chosen destination, the Pigeon House, is also an omen that the journey may not go well. The Pigeon House began as Dublin workers' housing, then became a hotel and restaurant for foreign sailors traveling from abroad. In this context, the narrator might think of the Pigeon House as a hub for travelers and adventurers. However, in the 18th century, the English military seized the Pigeon House and made it into a fort, a direct example of how a Dublin cultural institution was taken over and reworked by colonial powers. By the time the narrator was making his trip to the Pigeon House in the late 19th or very early 20th century, it was a sewage processing and power plant, a sign of literal decay as it collected and treated the city's wastewater.

Mahony began to play the Indian as soon as we were out of public sight. He chased a crowd of ragged girls, brandishing his unloaded catapult and, when two ragged boys began, out of chivalry, to fling stones at us, he proposed that we should charge them. I objected that the boys were too small, and so we walked on, the ragged troop screaming after us: *"Swaddlers! Swaddlers!"* thinking that we were Protestants because Mahony, who was dark-complexioned, wore the silver badge of a cricket club in his cap.

Related Characters: The narrator, Mahony, The Ragged Boys and Girls (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears just after Mahony declares that since Leo didn't show up, they ought to take his money and go on without him. While Maloney thereby gets the journey started, he then immediately derails it by attacking a group of poor, possibly orphaned girls for no reason. His aggressive impulses mirror Joe Dillon's expressions of masculinity—and the narrator even calls Mahony's aggression "playing the Indian"—but in this case that aggression is not being used to fight off colonial power but rather to abuse weaker and poorer children. The ragged girls and ragged boys are the first physical sign in the story of the widespread poverty in Dublin at the turn of the 20th century, hinting at the city's continual social decline under

English colonization. Mahony's expression of masculinity, like Joe Dillon's, only takes advantage of people weaker than him. Masculine aggression, the story implies, is not only a force for liberation. The very same aggression can be a force of oppression.

When the ragged boys fight back by throwing rocks at the narrator and Mahony, calling them "swaddlers," derogatory slang for Protestants, Joyce highlights how class differences can sow division even among people with the same religious background. Although Mahony and the narrator are Catholics, their wealth—and the cricket badge in Mahony's cap, cricket being a traditionally English game—makes the ragged boys and girls see them as enemies. Mahony's aggression doesn't help them resolve the division, either. Ultimately, the narrator is able to appeal to Mahony to get him not to keep fighting the poor children. But the altercation reveals how divided even the youngest Dubliners—and even Catholics—are among themselves.

> When we landed we watched the discharging of the graceful threemaster which we had observed from the other quay. Some bystander said that she was a Norwegian vessel. I went to the stern and tried to decipher the legend upon it but, failing to do so, I came back and examined the foreign sailors to see had any of them green eyes for I had some confused notion….

Related Characters: The narrator (speaker), Mahony

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears just after the narrator and Mahony cross the River Liffey. When the narrator searches the sailors to see if any have green eyes, Joyce drops a subtle reference to Homer's *Odyssey* since its hero, Odysseus (a sailor, adventurer, war hero, and Ancient Greek symbol of ideal masculinity) is said to have had green eyes. The narrator's disappointment is just another letdown he experiences on his journey.

Meanwhile, the literary roots of the narrator's idea that he might see some green-eyed people, and that those green eyes would signal that he was on a real adventure and that there are real adventurers in the world, highlight how much his expectations are based on fiction rather than reality. The story constantly undermines the narrator's hoped-for adventure, and in doing so calls into question the nature of real-world adventures and whether such adventures are even possibility in the real modern world.

> We could find no dairy and so we went into a huckster's shop and bought a bottle of raspberry lemonade each. Refreshed by this, Mahony chased a cat down a lane, but the cat escaped into a wide field. We both felt rather tired and when we reached the field we made at once for a sloping bank over the ridge of which we could see the Dodder.
>
> It was too late and we were too tired to carry out our project of visiting the Pigeon House. We had to be home before four o'clock lest our adventure should be discovered.

Related Characters: The narrator (speaker), Mahony

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mahony and the narrator are nowhere near their hoped-for destination of the Pigeon House, and are exhausted, hot, and hungry. But the snacks they buy in Ringsend, a suburb of Dublin, only gives Mahony enough energy to chase a cat—yet another instance in which Mahoney's masculine aggression involves terrorizing a weaker being and in which that aggression derails the journey in a way that the narrator is powerless to stop.

As they note the time and their exhaustion, the boys' choice not to complete their journey deals the final blow to the narrator's hopes of reaching a port of adventure—even though if the narrator actually made it to the Pigeon House, he might be disappointed to find a sewage reservoir and power plant, anyway. While the narrator planned his adventure as a way to escape school and home, the routines of school and home never cease to control his attempted adventure—he has to be home by four so that he continues to abide by the general timelines of a typical school day.

While he expressed these sentiments which bored us a little we kept silent. Then he began to talk of school and of books. He asked us whether we had read the poetry of Thomas Moore or the works of Sir Walter Scott and Lord Lytton. I pretended that I had read every book he mentioned so that in the end he said:

"Ah, I can see you are a bookworm like myself. Now," he added, pointing to Mahony who was regarding us with open eyes, "he is different; he goes in for games."

He said he had all Sir Walter Scott's works and all Lord Lytton's works at home and never tired of reading them. "Of course," he said, "there were some of Lord Lytton's works which boys couldn't read."

Related Characters: The narrator, The strange old man (speaker), Mahony

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

This passage reveals how the old man gets the narrator and Mahony sucked in to his perverse fantasies. At first, the man appears just like any other old man the boys might meet on their journey: nostalgic about his youth, a little trite in his observations, and generally harmless. And as a result, the narrator is just as bored with the man as he has been with everything and everyone else on the journey thus far.

But the man also seems to represent a different kind of masculinity than any of the other examples the narrator has seen. Like the narrator, he seems to be bookish, timid, and sociable. His recognition that the narrator is into books while Mahony is focused on "games" is at once accurate and also suggests that the narrator's cultural interests are in fact more valuable than Mahony's childish masculine aggression. It's also significant that the authors the old man references are Irishmen. While the narrator seems to live in a world in which Irish culture is dying—whether suffocated by English colonizers or the Catholic Church—the old man offers a bridge back to that culture.

However, the old man's somewhat subtle reference to the sexual content in Lord Lytton's work at the end of this passage is the first red flag that the man might not just be talkative, and the fact that he singles out the narrator for his own bookishness and excludes Mahony gives the reader the first signal that the narrator might be in danger. Further, the old man's keen interest in the sexual content in the works of these Irish literary heroes also complicates his role as a bridge to that Irish cultural past, as it suggests a kind of perversion of that past.

In my heart I thought that what he said about boys and sweethearts was reasonable. But I disliked the words in his mouth and I wondered why he shivered once or twice as if he feared something or felt a sudden chill. As he proceeded I noticed that his accent was good. He began to speak to us about girls, saying what nice soft hair they had and how soft their hands were and how all girls were not so good as they seemed to be if one only knew. There was nothing he liked, he said, so much as looking at a nice young girl, at her nice white hands and her beautiful soft hair. He gave me the impression that he was repeating something which he had learned by heart or that, magnetised by some words of his own speech, his mind was slowly circling round and round in the same orbit.

Related Characters: The narrator, The strange old man (speaker), Mahony

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator is responding to the old man's statement that every boy has a sweetheart. In the repressive social environment of the Irish Catholic Church at the turn of the 20th century, the man has already transgressed social boundaries by being so casual about young boys' pseudo-sexual desire for young girls. Normally, the narrator implies, everyone avoids the topic, but he admits to himself that there is truth that the man is describing that is otherwise being suppressed.

At the same time, the narrator begins to feel his instincts for danger stirring as he "disliked" how the man spoke and carried himself, a sign that he is entering the unknown for which he may not be prepared. The man may be revealing something true, but he is doing it too intensely, too perversely. The man does not offer a corrective to the Church's suppression of such topics, but rather a perverted escape from it.

Meanwhile, the man's "good," presumably educated or upper-class, accent makes him an even more confusing character. His shabby suit does not match his speech, nor do his words seem to match his accent. But as he continues to creep the narrator out, it becomes apparent that the man's physical appearance matches his moral decay: his good accent hides his perversions that lurk on the inside.

The way the man speaks forces the narrator into a state of near-hypnosis as he circles back around to the same phrases, suggesting the man's paralysis in the face of his own perversions. And the narrator's sense that the man sounds like he has memorized his speech calls the reader back to Leo Dillon's botched Latin recitation—this detail suggests that while the narrator may think of himself as being on an adventure, the man's speech is just part of his routine, a disappointing and unsettling revelation.

> He stood up slowly, saying that he had to leave us for a minute or so, a few minutes, and, without changing the direction of my gaze, I saw him walking slowly away from us towards the near end of the field. We remained silent when he had gone. After a silence of a few minutes I heard Mahony exclaim:
>
> "I say! Look what he's doing!"
>
> As I neither answered nor raised my eyes Mahony exclaimed again:
>
> "I say…He's a queer old josser!"
>
> "In case he asks us for our names," I said, "let you be Murphy and I'll be Smith."

Related Characters: The narrator, The strange old man, Mahony (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the old man's speech culminates with him slipping away to the edge of the field, presumably to masturbate. In doing so, he reaches the pinnacle of his own "wild," in this case, deviant, masculine sexuality.

And while Mahony looks on in awe and in disbelief, the narrator seems to shrink when faced with *this* kind of deviation from the norm. Even after Mahony entreats him to look, the narrator keeps his eyes fixed on the ground in front of him. It is ambiguous whether the narrator is so paralyzed with fear that he can't look or whether by not looking, he doesn't give the old man the audience he seems to want.

Either way, the narrator steps up to try to take charge and craft a plan to keep himself and Mahony safe by suggesting that they give the man fake names if he asks. But the reader can see the flaws in his plan: the man doesn't seem to care who the boys are, and if this is a part of his routine, it won't matter whether he knows the boys' names or not. It is worth noting that giving a false name is also a tactic that Odysseus uses at one point during his adventures, so the narrator is in a sense applying lessons learned from the epics to his own "adventure." But rather than facing a monstrous cyclops as Odysseus did, the narrator is faced with the reality of a perverted old man.

> After an interval the man spoke to me. He said that my friend was a very rough boy and asked did he get whipped often at school. I was going to reply indignantly that we were not National School boys to be *whipped*, as he called it; but I remained silent. He began to speak on the subject of chastising boys. His mind, as if magnetised again by his speech, seemed to circle slowly round and round its new centre. He said that when boys were that kind they ought to be whipped and well whipped…I was surprised at this sentiment and involuntarily glanced up at his face. As I did so I met the gaze of a pair of bottle-green eyes peering at me from under a twitching forehead. I turned my eyes away again.

Related Characters: The narrator, The strange old man (speaker), Mahony

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs after the man returns from masturbating and sits back down. While Mahony made an escape for himself by chasing a cat away into the far end of the field, the narrator did not. Instead, he appears stuck, unable to figure a way out of the situation, although his understated narrative style does not provide the reader with much insight into his thought process.

When the man changes topic from his former description of the beauty of young girls to whipping boys, the narrator nearly reacts aggressively for the first time because he is so offended by the man's language. However, the fact that the narrator is more offended at the idea that the man might think him to be lower-class than he is only reveals that Father Butler's attempts to sow further division between wealthier and poorer boys worked. And the narrator ends up not saying anything, anyway, still apparently paralyzed by the situation he has found himself in.

As the man talks in a sexual tone about whipping boys, Joyce invites the reader to consider that the man was likely brought up in a similar environment to the narrator and Mahony. Since the man's accent is good, he may have had a similar education to the narrator—and received similarly harsh punishments. The repressive sexual attitudes espoused by the Catholic Church would have made it even harder for the man to examine his sexual desires, perhaps contributing to their deviancy. The man then explains (if not worse) these desires to another generation of young Dubliners, continuing the cycle of violence and moral decay. In this way the story expertly captures the intertwining of decay and the Church's efforts to suppress such decay.

When the narrator looks up at the man and sees his green eyes—what he once thought was a sure sign that he is on an adventure—he realizes how far off his expectations were from reality: the danger in adventure is real and frightening, and he is not as prepared for it as he thought he was.

❝ I waited till his monologue paused again. Then I stood up abruptly. Lest I should betray my agitation I delayed a few moments pretending to fix my shoe properly and then, saying that I was obliged to go, I bade him good-day. I went up the slope calmly but my heart was beating quickly with fear that he would seize me by the ankles. When I reached the top of the slope I turned round and, without looking at him, called loudly across the field:

"Murphy!"

My voice had an accent of forced bravery in it and I was ashamed of my paltry stratagem. I had to call the name again before Mahony saw me and hallooed in answer. How my heart beat as he came running across the field to me! He ran as if to bring me aid. And I was penitent; for in my heart I had always despised him a little.

Related Characters: The narrator, The strange old man (speaker), Mahony

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes the narrator's attempt to break out of his paralyzed state and take action. However, his action is severely underwhelming: he simply stands and walks away, hiding his terror—not at all like the heroic escapes he reads about in fiction. Although his attempt is effective, his sense of himself as a hero takes yet another blow when Mahony at first doesn't respond to the fake name they decided upon and the narrator has to call again.

But the shame the narrator feels at his own disappointed expectations of himself is balanced by the gratitude he feels as Mahony loyally sprints across the field to him as if he needed help. In this moment, the narrator recognizes two things. First, he recognizes that the adventure he wants may not exist anywhere but in fiction—this instant marks a key point in his coming-of-age as he realizes that the world is not at all like he wants it to be. Second, he senses that in the strange and perverse adventure that they *do* find themselves in, Mahony has some of the heroic qualities that he himself lacks. So not only is the real world different from what the narrator hoped it would be, he himself failed to live up to his expectations.

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.

AN ENCOUNTER

Joe Dillon introduces the narrator and his friends to **the Wild West** by lending them his adventure magazines. After school, the narrator and his friends meet Joe and his younger brother Leo in their backyard to stage "Indian battles." But no matter how hard they fight against him, Joe always wins and celebrates with a victory dance.

Joe Dillon's interest in the Wild West connects the Irish, who were under English colonial control at the turn of the 20th century, to indigenous people in the United States. Both groups had been fighting losing battles against colonial powers for centuries; and after so many defeats, the losing battles become almost routine. But Joe's history-flipping victories over the cowboys suggest that young Irish people might yet have a new fighting spirit and an ability to carve a new path, like the adventuresome Wild West. As a role model for the younger narrator, Joe sets an example of aggressive, heroic masculinity, and stokes the narrator's desire for adventure. But because he is always on the losing side, the narrator hints that he does not necessarily see Joe's victories as hope for the Irish—instead, they are just another routine. Further, the fact that Joe's victories occur in a fantasy game suggests that the hope of this sort of aggression leading to liberation might itself also be a fantasy.

Every morning, Joe's parents go to mass on Gardiner Street, and when the narrator goes to the Dillons' house, Mrs Dillon's "peaceful odour" lingers. But even so, Joe always played too roughly with the kids who were younger and less adventurous such as the narrator. The narrator thinks that Joe looks like "some kind of an Indian" when he plays wearing a tea-cozy on his head, beating a fake drum, and shouting. When the narrator later learns that Joe has decided to go into the priesthood, he and his friends can hardly believe it.

The Dillons' religious devotion is extreme for the time, and the church on Gardiner Street was a Jesuit church. These details signal that the Dillons' piety is likely also tied up in social ambitions, since the Jesuits were at the top of the Catholic socioeconomic ladder. In this way the story makes clear that Catholic religion is connected to social power in Ireland. When the narrator describes Joe's aggression, he signals to the reader that he does not experience his routine defeat in their games as a colonized people's victory over their colonizers, but as an aggressive masculine force's victory over his more vulnerable opponents—aggression can be used as easily to harm the weak as fight off the strong. Joe's decision to go into the priesthood somewhat undercuts the picture that the narrator painted of him as a violent and wild boy: the Catholic Church's strict order and discipline seems the exact opposite of Joe's habits. While the narrator is left mystified and somewhat disappointed by the "taming" of the wild hero, the reader can see how a powerful institution like the Church might appeal to a power-seeking boy like Joe, and how the Church co-opts such power-seeking in order to maintain its own power. Meanwhile, Joe's move into the priesthood might also cement his own family's social rise. In all, the story depicts a Catholic Church that is cynical and worldly, as opposed to a bulwark to protect the weak.

With Joe gone, the narrator and his friends carry on **the Wild West** games. While some of them play because they enjoy it, others play because they don't want to seem "studious" or cowardly. The narrator belongs to the latter group. Although the Wild West stories give him the escape he wants, he really prefers detective stories that have wild and beautiful women in them.

By continuing Joe's war games without their leader, the boys attempt to live up to his example of masculinity. In this way, Joe's wildness becomes an organizing force for the boys' masculinity just like the church will presumably reorder Joe's own bravado into new outlets. Meanwhile, by distinguishing the narrator and his tastes from the other boys', Joyce suggests that there is more than one way to be masculine—although the narrator's path is less conventional. Moreover, the adventure of the Wild West starts to wane for the narrator as the games become just another part of his routine. Rather than adventure and excitement, they just bring him more repetition. However, the narrator and the other "studious" boys are paralyzed by the pressure of how best to be masculine.

Even though there is nothing bad about **the Wild West** stories, the narrator and his friends made sure to read them in secret when at school. One day, Leo Dillon flubs his Latin translation in class, at which point their teacher, Father Butler, notices and confiscates an adventure magazine from him. In front of the entire class, Father Butler chastises Leo for reading such "rubbish" instead of Roman History and adds that the author likely writes "for a drink." He shames his class of "educated" boys for reading adventure stories, saying he might understand such behavior if they attended National School (as opposed to the Jesuit-run day school that they do attend). He finishes up his speech by telling Leo to work harder, and when the narrator looks into Leo's face, the Wild West loses some of its "glory" in his eyes.

Leo's Latin translation links the Catholic Church to the general feeling of boredom with routine and repetition that the narrator feels throughout the story. By translating Latin, Leo does not even think for himself, only repeats what someone else has already said—and although Ireland's main colonial opponents at the turn of the 20th century were the English, the fact that middle-class Irish schoolboys learned Latin reminds the reader that the Romans colonized Ireland first. This detail makes the story's colonial backdrop even more complex: while the Catholic Church was often supportive of Irish Nationalism, it, too, could repress the Irish people. And by reading older books that venerate colonial powers, the Roman History that Leo reads ends up subtly working against the cause of Irish freedom (as does learning Latin rather than the native Irish language that was in the process of dying out). Likewise, Father Butler's quickness to punish Leo for reading for fun hints towards the parts of the boys' Jesuit education that repress them rather than empower them. Father Butler's sudden rage echoes Joe Dillon's aggression. However, rather than inspire wildness and a sense of adventure like Joe did, Father Butler punishes unruliness and disobedience, enforcing the boys' routine every day. Meanwhile, Butler's words highlight the social and economic disparities between the middle- or upper-class Jesuits and the poorer Irish children who would have to attend the state-sponsored, multifaith National Schools. By shaming the boys for acting like National School boys, Father Butler deepens the divisions between rich and poor, Catholic and Protestant in Ireland by passing on his biases to Ireland's youngest minds. Finally, when the narrator sees the power that Father Butler has over Leo, Joyce suggests that the narrator's waning interest in the Wild West is rooted in the narrator's new recognition that, in practice, power and aggressive masculinity can quash a wild or unruly spirit and mold it into living a repetitive and obedient life. Father Butler's rebuke is the first major force that disappoints the narrator's hope for adventure in life.

With summer approaching, though, the narrator's taste for "wild sensations" returns. He is tired of just playing games of war, and longs to experience a real adventure. To make an adventure for himself, he plots to skip school with Leo and another boy named Mahony. They plan their cover stories for their school absences and pool their money so they can afford to take the ferry out to a former military dock called **the Pigeon House**. Leo fears being seen by one of their teachers during their adventure, but Mahony reminds him that their teachers will be in school. They all shake hands and plan to meet the next morning.

The narrator's returning desire for adventure suggests that, despite Father Butler's efforts, the narrator has not succumbed to expectations that he be obedient. That Leo remains scared of being punished, though, foreshadows the first flaw in the narrator's plan. By skipping school, the narrator's plan is both an adventure and a conscious break from his routine and from authority, a hint that there is hope for him to avoid the same paralysis that Joyce saw in many Irish people. But the history of the narrator's destination, the Pigeon House, complicates his journey: the Pigeon House started out as construction workers' lodging, and then became a hotel and restaurant for foreign sailors—in other words, a hub for adventurers. But the English made it into a military fort in the 18th century, and, at the time when "An Encounter" was set it was a sewage processing and power plant for the city. While the narrator does not indicate why he wants to go to the Pigeon House, its gradual decline from an adventuring hub connecting Ireland to the world to colonial military fort to literal sewage plant aligns with the overall sense of decay that Joyce felt Ireland was experiencing under English colonial rule. However, the Pigeon House also invites religious comparisons: its name evokes the common representation of the Holy Spirit as a dove, and the fact that the Pigeon House produces light for the city as well makes it not only a symbol of decay, but a symbol of hope and renewal.

After a bad night's sleep, the narrator is the first to arrive at their meeting-place in the morning. He takes a moment to admire his shoes, which he had cleaned the night before, and contentedly watches businesspeople pass by. Mahony soon arrives and pulls out a **slingshot**, explaining that he brought it to "have some gas" with birds along the way. The narrator notices how often Mahony uses slang. After waiting for Leo for another half hour, Mahony declares that he knew that Leo would chicken out and that they should take Leo's money and venture on without him.

When the narrator sleeps badly and Leo immediately bails on the plan, Joyce sets the scene for the coming adventure's series of unexpected disappointments. But Mahony's arrival with a slingshot sets an entirely different tone. Unlike Leo and the narrator, Mahony is traditionally-masculine, street-smart, and, based on his use of slang, lower-class (or at least not concerned about appearing lower-class). The slingshot sets Mahony apart from the narrator by revealing his greater inclination to violence and action, and indeed, Mahony gets the journey started by deciding to abandon Leo and treating Leo's contributed money as forfeit.

As the narrator and Mahony walk, Mahony chases some "ragged girls" and threatens them with his unloaded **slingshot**. When two "ragged boys" defend the girls by throwing stones at Mahony and the narrator, Mahony wants to fight back. The narrator points out that the orphan boys are too small to fight and convinces Mahony to leave them alone. As the narrator and Mahony pass by, the orphans all call them "Swaddlers," mistaking the two boys for Protestants because Mahony was wearing a hat with the badge of cricket team on it.

Although Mahony gets the ball rolling on the trip, the fact that he immediately uses his slingshot to start trouble reinforces the idea that traditional masculinity only picks on the vulnerable: by chasing the ragged girls, Mahony not only derails the journey, but also invites conflict from the ragged boys who might otherwise have left he and the narrator alone. The detail that his slingshot is "unloaded" makes it a kind of phallic symbol that is all bark and no bite: while he can't use it against the girls, he still wields it over them as a symbol of his aggression. By picking on children weaker than he is, Mahony unwittingly mimics Joe Dillon's victories over opponents who had no power to win—and felt they had no power to change—the game. Meanwhile, the presence of the ragged boys and girls highlight how impoverished Dublin was at the turn of the 20th century compared to its neighbors, another sign of its decay and paralysis. Rather than move forward and lift up its most vulnerable citizens, Dublin remained stagnant under the same colonial control it had experienced for decades. When the ragged boys and girls call the narrator and Mahony "Swaddlers," a pejorative slang term for Protestants, they highlight the existing divisions between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland while also illuminating how class differences also create divisions among Catholics. When wealthy (or wealthier) Catholic Dubliners such as Mahony and Father Butler attack poorer Catholics (whether physically or verbally), it is even more difficult for the Irish to unify against the English, keeping them stuck in place. That the ragged boys and girls mistake Mahony for a Protestant also suggests that there are ways that the richer Catholics, for all their talk of Irish independence, are in fact complicit in Protestant political rule of Ireland.

When the narrator and Mahony reach a popular swimming spot in Dublin Bay called the Smoothing Iron, they try to get the spot all to themselves but fail because they need a third person to pull it off. Frustrated, they call Leo a "funk" and imagine how many strokes of the pandybat, a reinforced leather strap, he will get "at three o'clock" from a teacher back at school. By the river, they watch construction crews work until cart-drivers yell at them for being in the way. Once all the workers break for lunch, the boys buy snacks and eat while they watch the ships pass by. Mahony says it would be "right skit" to go to sea, which makes the narrator imagine really seeing all the places he learned about in school and feel far away from school and from home.

As the boys fail to secure the Smoothing Iron for themselves, and as they are admonished for being in construction crews' way, they face yet more disappointed expectations on their journey. When they vent by imagining Leo being punished at school, stuck in his usual routine, they further illuminate the Church's tools for enforcing order and obedience. The detail that Leo will be punished "at three o'clock" carries religious implications since Jesus is said to have died on the cross at three o'clock. But even as the narrator and Mahony imagine Leo trapped in routine, they fall prey to routine themselves: watching the construction workers is just watching others' daily routines. When they break for lunch, they only do so because they are copying the workers, suggesting that they fall in line with others' routines even while they are on their adventure. While the narrator is having a new experience, the adventure he imagines of going out to sea is much more exciting to him than the adventure he is actually on. Once again, his expectations do not match reality.

After they eat, the narrator and Mahony cross the river on a ferry. They try to act seriously but laugh the moment their eyes meet. When they land on the other side of the river, the narrator tries, and fails, to read the writing on a Norwegian ship. As the foreign sailors mill around, he looks at them to see if any of them have **green eyes** but finds that none of them do. He watches one sailor with green-ish eyes entertain the crowd on the quay for a while but realizes the performance repeats and he and Mahony move on.

As the narrator watches a sailor entertain a crowd, he becomes even more acutely aware of the fact that even new sights quickly become repetitive and disappointing. At this point in the story, the narrator's overall boredom with what he sees stands in stark contrast with his expectations for a journey. Even the performing is literally doing a routine, repeating his act so that it just seems new for each set of passers-by. The narrator hopes to see a green-eyed sailor because, in Homer's Odyssey, *the war hero, sailor, adventurer, and traditionally-masculine archetype Odysseus is said to have green eyes. This hope emphasizes the narrator's reliance on stories for his expectations of adventure, the consistent failure of reality to meet those expectations, and establishes green eyes as a symbol of adventure in the story.*

As the day gets hotter, the narrator and Mahony wander into Ringsend, a Dublin neighborhood. When they buy sweets and raspberry lemonade, Mahony regains some of his energy and chases a cat into a field by the Dodder River. Exhausted, the boys sit down by the riverbank and decide that they are too tired to go all the way to **the Pigeon House** and still make it home on time to avoid being caught. Mahony is disappointed until the narrator suggests they take the train home. When the sun goes behind a cloud, the boys sit quietly thinking.

The weather matches the boys' mood and closes in on them, the heat and humidity slowing them down as they start to lose motivation to complete their trip. Once again, Mahony steers them off track by chasing a cat into a field, and the narrator's overall inability to keep himself and Mahony focused and moving forces him to abandon reaching their final destination. Discouraged and exhausted by their experience of a "real" adventure, the boys sit down, and the weather once again mirrors their emotions as a cloud covers the sun and makes the day darker. Note also how this adventure to escape school must still abide by the routines of school—if they don't get home when they would on a typical school day, they'll get caught.

Sometime later, a man wearing a cheap suit and using a walking stick walks into the field. He passes the narrator and Mahony in the field, glancing at them as he walks by, then turns around and walks back and says hello. The man sits beside them and talks about the weather and the authors he read when he was in school: Thomas Moore, Sir Walter Scott, and Lord Lytton. Although the conversation bores the narrator, he pretends to have read each of the books the man mentioned.

When the man enters the field and starts talking to the boys, the narrator's assumptions that adventure will feel exciting and that dangers will be obvious start to go out the window. However, the details about the man's advanced age and shabby suit suggest and foreshadow his internal moral decay. The narrator's initial boredom with the man's talk aligns with his overall sense of boredom on his adventure. But as a bookish older man, the man in the field at least presents a different image of masculinity than any the narrator has encountered before. Further, the writers the man mentions are all Irish, implying that he offers a connection to a successfully Irish cultural past.

Once the narrator pretends to recognize the books, the man says that the narrator must be a fellow "bookworm" and points at Mahony, saying he is different: he prefers games. The man tells the boys that he has all of Scott's and Lytton's books and re-reads them often—but then adds that some of Lord Lytton's books are not for boys to read. When Mahony asks him why, the narrator is embarrassed because he does not want the man to think he is "as stupid as Mahony." But the man does not answer Mahony's question. Instead, he just smiles, and the narrator notices that most of his teeth are missing and that all the teeth he has are yellow.

The man tries to connect with the narrator by claiming him as a fellow "bookworm" and further implies that such bookishness offers a kind of serious masculinity in contrast to the aggressive "games" that Mahony plays. Yet the seemingly positive male role model that the older man seems to offer quickly starts to turn sour when he hints at the sexual content in some of his favorite books. In this moment the story's tone shifts and there is a sense of uneasiness as well as boredom in the narrator's emotions. On the one hand, the old man might simply be tactlessly looking for someone to talk to. But on the other hand, he might be singling the narrator out deliberately because of his difference from Mahony; a boy who prefers books to games might be easer to manipulate. While either seem possible at first, when the man smiles and reveals his mouth of rotting teeth, the signs of decay are so obvious that it is clear that the man poses a threat. While the adventure was disappointing compared to the narrator's expectations before the man sat down, after the man smiles, it takes a dangerous and frightening turn, subverting his expectations in a new way.

The man asks the boys which of them has "the most sweethearts." Mahony answers that he has "three totties," while the narrator says he has none. In disbelief, the man says that the narrator *must* have a sweetheart. The narrator says nothing. When Mahony asks the man how many sweethearts *he* has, the man smiles again and says that when he was a boy he had many sweethearts: "Every boy," he says, "has a little sweetheart." The narrator finds the man's attitude on the subject oddly casual given his age.

When the man's conversation narrows from vague sexual suggestions to more direct probing about "sweethearts," Mahony's version of masculinity better prepares him to handle the man than the narrator's. By bragging about his "three totties," Mahony once again fulfills the more traditional masculine role by projecting his sexual (or, in the case of boys as young as the narrator and Mahony, pseudo-sexual) prowess, and turns the question back on the man. By contrast, the narrator's silence reveals how paralyzed he is by the confrontation and by his own unease—unease that Mahony does not appear to feel. Rather than face the man head-on like Mahony does, the narrator shrinks, failing to meet the expectations of a hero in the face of a possible threat.

As the narrator reflects on what the man is saying, he thinks that the man's words themselves are "reasonable." But the narrator grows increasingly uneasy as he finds that he disliked how the "reasonable" words sounded in the man's mouth, and he wonders why the man sometimes shivers while he's speaking, as if he is cold or afraid.

The narrator's mounting unease signals to the reader that his journey has veered into an unknown, dangerous aspect of his adventure—an adventure that is not at all like the one he had imagined. Instead of a positive masculine role model, the man now appears decidedly creepy as the narrator intuits that something is wrong with the way the man talks about young boys and their sweethearts. As the reality of the journey sidesteps the narrator's expectations in new ways, the "adventure" aspect of it ramps up—but rather than face danger with excitement, the narrator is just afraid. His feelings fail to rise up to his ideas of heroes' reactions to danger.

From his talk about sweethearts, the man transitions to talking about girls. As he talks about their "nice soft hair" and "soft hands," the narrator notices that the man has an upper-class accent. The man tells the narrator and Mahony that "all girls were not so good as they seemed to be if one only knew" and that he likes nothing more than looking at nice young girls.

The man's visual and auditory mismatch exacerbates the narrator's sense that something is wrong: the man's shabby suit and rotted teeth do not match his "good," upper-class accent, nor does the perverted way he talks about girls. His masculine sexuality veers even further into the perverted. Rather than be secretly bookish and timid like the narrator or aggressive like Mahony and Joe Dillon, the man hides his wild, lawless, and perverted masculine sexuality behind an educated accent and lures the boys in with routine conversation before revealing his decayed morals. The narrator seems utterly unprepared for the danger he has found himself in. Unlike storybook heroes, the narrator is just a young boy with no clue how to react, so he just stays still.

Listening closely, the narrator notices the man circling back to similar phrases and gets the sense that the man might be "repeating something which he had learned by heart," or that the words have somehow "magnetised" the man's mind so that he always returns to them. As the man keeps talking, the narrator notices more variations in the man's voice: sometimes it seems like he is "simply alluding" to something obvious and sometimes he talks like he is telling the boys a secret that he doesn't want anyone else to hear. All the while, the narrator keeps his eyes on the ground in front of him and not on the man.

The man's repetitive speech, particularly the narrator's observation that the man seems to have memorized what he was saying "by heart" echoes the earlier scene in which Leo Dillon messes up his Latin translation. With these details, the narrator and the reader gain insight into the fact that although the boys are unused to and unprepared for the man talking to them like this, for the man this interaction is just another part of his routine. The man's circular way of speaking makes him seem "magnetised" in the narrator's eyes, but the man can also be seen as paralyzed—if he is essentially reciting something he had memorized, he had to have learned it from somewhere, and although he may have invented it himself, the overall tone of paralysis and decay in the story suggests that the man's perversions and decaying appearance may just be reflections of the backward, morally rotten landscape of 19th century Dublin. The Catholic Church's repressive attitudes about sexuality may have contributed to the man's descent into wild sexual perversion; if young boys are almost totally ignorant about sex, and it is spoken about as both something "obvious" and something "secret," it follows that the man might be a product of his repressive landscape. If the narrator has no positive male role models, the old man might not have had any either, circling back to Joyce's overall criticism of the social and moral decay in Dublin. As the man speaks, he seems to pass on his own sense of paralysis to the narrator, who simply stares at the ground silently and appears hypnotized by the man's language. At this stage of the story, the narrator is trapped in a dangerous situation and unable to break himself out of it.

After a long time talking, the man suddenly falls silent and slowly stands. He tells the boys that he has to leave for a few minutes and the narrator watches him walk away out of the corner of his eye. He and Mahony don't speak to each other until Mahony says, "I say! Look what he's doing!" When the narrator doesn't look up or respond, Mahony says, "I say… He's a queer old josser!" The narrator breaks his silence to suggest to Mahony that if the man asks for their names, they should give him fake names: Murphy and Smith. But the two boys don't speak any further.

The man getting up and walking away provides the boys with a possible escape. But neither of them seize the opportunity, and it is unclear whether they are too afraid or too intrigued. The narrator begins to think like a hero in danger when he tells Mahony to give the man fake names. But the reader can see that the strategy is for nothing; the man doesn't seem to care who the boys are, only that he has them stuck listening to him. The story strongly implies that the man walks off to masturbate at the end of the field, subjecting the boys to his perversions even from a distance. Masturbation itself suggests the idea of Dublin in decay; it reveals the man's decaying morals and is a "non-productive" expression of sexuality. The narrator's refusal to watch what the man is doing strikes a complex balance between paralysis, an inability to act, and a break from routine. By refusing to look, the narrator refuses the man what he wants. But his aims in looking away are ambiguous.

In the silence, the narrator wonders whether he should avoid the man if he comes back. When the man does come back and sit down again, the narrator stays put. But Mahony sees the same cat he chased earlier and jumps up to chase it again. The narrator and the man silently watch as Mahony fails to catch the cat, throws stones at the wall the cat climbed to escape, then starts to wander around the other end of the field.

When the narrator doesn't get up and run like Mahony, he once again fails to act like a hero would, even if that action means running away. Although Joyce's understated writing style does not let the reader in on the narrator's thought process, the reader can sense the narrator's continuing sense of paralysis before danger.

After watching Mahony for a while, the man observes that Mahony is "a very rough boy" and asks the narrator if he gets "whipped" often at school. Offended by the man's language, the narrator wants to make clear that he and Mahony don't get "whipped" like boys at the National School do, but instead he doesn't say anything. When the narrator doesn't respond, the man starts talking about whipping boys, his voice falling into the same "magnetised" rhythm from earlier.

Once the man starts talking about "whipping" boys, his sexuality fully encompasses both perversion and aggression, the same aggression that only picks on the more vulnerable. The old man initially seemed like a possible role model and a bridge to Ireland's cultural past—but now his perversion makes clear that the rot in Ireland goes deeper, and there may not be any good male models or salvation in past cultural heights. Meanwhile, despite the narrator's sense of imminent danger, his primary emotional response is to be offended when he feels he is being treated as lower-class. While the narrator's conversations with Mahony reveal that the boys do get punished at school, the narrator gets bogged down in wanting to assert that he is more cultured than the "National School boys," suggesting that he has taken Father Butler's shaming to heart. By repeating the word "magnetised," Joyce signals to the reader that the man's fixation on young girls is not his only perversion: he is also sexually excited by beating boys. The talk about punishment that pervades the story combined with the detail about the man's "good" accent suggests that this perversion, too, might be a product of his own upbringing in the repressive and punitive environment of Irish schools and society.

As the man talks around his new subject, saying that the only good thing to do with a rough boy is to whip him because "what he wanted was to get a nice warm whipping," the narrator listens, shocked. In his surprise, the narrator glances up at the man and finds himself looking directly into the man's "**bottle-green eyes**." The man's forehead twitches in response and the narrator quickly looks away again.

With the appearance of the old man's green eyes, the narrator receives the signal he wanted that he was on an adventure. But the old man's perversions by this point are so clear that the narrator also realizes in this moment that adventure in the real world is not as pretty or simple as stories make them seem; danger lurks where he least expected it and he is not at all equipped to deal with it. The man's wildness is real, perverse, and violent, a far cry from Joe Dillon's play-fighting, or Odysseus's escapades.

Seeming to have forgotten his earlier opinions about boys and sweethearts, the man tells the narrator that if he ever saw a boy "talking to girls or having a girl for a sweetheart" then he would "whip him and whip him" to teach him not to talk to girls. Confused, the narrator stays silent and listens as the man tells him that he wants nothing more than to give a boy who has a sweetheart but lies and says he doesn't "such a whipping as no boy ever got in this world."

The man's focus on whipping boys who lie about having sweethearts seems to focus in particular on the narrator, who claimed not to have any sweethearts. Yet the narrator stays silent and still, once again failing to act even though the danger he is in becomes increasingly obvious. His confusion reveals how naïve he is about sexuality as the man works himself up once more by repeating phrases about whipping boys.

While the man describes the kind of whipping he would like to give to such a boy, the narrator takes note of the man's tone: his usual monotone gives way to something that the narrator thinks is "almost affectionate." This tone, the narrator thinks, seems to "plead" with him to "understand" the man. The narrator keeps silent and waits for the man to stop talking again.

The man's "pleading" tone and the sense that the man wants to be understood again signals that the man's perversion may be a product of a repressive society that does not allow anyone to discuss or be understood regarding their thoughts about sex. But it also suggests that the man is seeking to connect with the narrator, and that hoped-for connection might involve whipping rather than conversation. Nonetheless the narrator continues to be under the spell of the man's voice—he needs for the repetition of it to stop in order to break free.

When the man finally pauses, the narrator quickly stands up. Not wanting to reveal his discomfort or appear too eager to leave, he spends a moment pretending to adjust his shoe, then says that he has to leave. He tells the man goodbye and walks "calmly" back towards the road, as his heart races with the fear that the man would "seize" him "by the ankles."

The narrator's escape is both bold compared to his previous inaction and disappointing in how delayed it is. Mahony has already made himself an "out," and the narrator appears to lag far behind Mahony's traditionally-masculine ability to act decisively under pressure. The narrator's terror falls short of his own expectations of a heroic escape—but he still breaks out of the man's trap.

At the top of the hill, the narrator avoids looking at the man and tries to get Mahony's attention, calling, "Murphy!" The narrator notices that his voice sounds like he is trying to sound brave and feels a bit ashamed of his plan when Mahony doesn't answer, and he has to call again. But when Mahony hears him, he runs across the field as if the narrator needed help. As the narrator's heart races watching Mahony run, he feels a stab of guilt, regretting all the time he had spent secretly disliking him.

Having to call Mahony's alias twice reveals how poorly thought-out the narrator's plan to use fake names is, making his failure as the leader of an adventure painfully evident. And as Mahony runs to the narrator, the narrator instantly recognizes the heroic qualities in Mahony that do not exist in himself. The narrator's guilt at disliking Mahony and disappointment in himself marks his coming-of-age as he learns to adjust his expectations of himself, others, and the world around him.


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