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**Hysteria and the Performance of Masculinity:
A Feminist Reading of James Joyce's "A Painful Case"**

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One of the most significant contributions of structuralist linguistic theory to contemporary feminist literary theory has been the formulation of binary oppositions. First articulated by Ferdinand de Saussure in his posthumously published 1916 work *Course in General Linguistics*, binary oppositions are a part of the inherent structure of language which defines words by their opposites. In a binary system, dark is defined as not-light, black is defined as not-white, and bad is defined as not-good. These terms occupy a place of either privilege or disfavor based on their position within

the binary. In the previous example, light is privileged over dark, white is privileged over black, and good is privileged over bad. Later structuralist theorists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss applied Saussure's definition of linguistic binaries to societies and systems of thought. Because all human thought is mediated by language, this same binary logic is one of the structures by which people understand the world. The fundamental binary of feminist theory is the binary between masculine and feminine. Implicit in each gender binary are secondary binaries: masculinity as rational, femininity as irrational; masculinity as non-emotional, femininity as over-emotional. In each of these gender binaries, the male, rational, and non-emotional are clearly privileged.

The disfavored status of the feminine as irrational and over-emotional in this gender binary leads to the conception of the feminine as hysterical. The root of the word "hysteria" comes from the Greek word "hystera," meaning "uterus." The Greeks believed that hysteria was an emotional condition peculiar to women, caused by menstrual cycles. In English usage, "hysteria" is a state of excess or uncontrollable emotion that has become part of the Western paradigmatic description of femininity. As it relates to femininity, hysteria not only casts the feminine as over-emotional but also renders women incapable of controlling emotion and therefore irrational.

James Joyce's story "A Painful Case" from his 1914 short story collection *Dubliners* describes a friendship and potential romantic relationship between two characters—Mr. James Duffy and Mrs. Emily Sinico—that is abruptly ruined

by hysteria. Mr. Duffy, an ostensibly masculine bank teller, fears hysteria as a feminine emotional force that threatens to undermine his masculinity. As a result, when Mrs. Sinico attempts physical and emotional intimacy with Mr. Duffy by pressing his hand to her cheek, he interprets her behavior as hysterical and impulsively breaks off their relationship. However, upon reading the news of Mrs. Sinico's tragic death four years later, Mr. Duffy reacts with extreme and uncontrollable emotional upheaval and irrationality. Through his compulsive fear of hysteria, Mr. Duffy ironically reveals himself to be emotionally hysterical, undermining his performance of masculinity and deconstructing the gendering of hysteria itself.

Mr. Duffy's performance of masculinity depends on his ability not to exhibit hysteria. Instead, Mr. Duffy counters any emotional impulse that threatens to become hysterical by retreating to hyper-rationality. As a result, Mr. Duffy's gendered identity is built around a negation: not-hysteria. Based upon Judith Butler's claim that gender is not an essential identity but "an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (900, emphasis Butler's), Mr. Duffy performs his gender through his rejecting hysteria. Mr. Duffy is able to perform not-hysteria by reversing each of its terms: if hysteria is overly emotional and irrational, not-hysteria must be non-emotional and hyper-rational. This performance of not-hysteria composes Mr. Duffy's masculinity. Mr. Duffy's gender identity becomes what Butler describes as "a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe

and to perform in the mode of belief" (901). Because Mr. Duffy believes in his own performance, he is not conscious of his own fear of hysteria.

Mr. Duffy reacts to his fear of hysteria with a compulsive need to emphasize his own rationality and masculinity. Joyce's initial description of Mr. Duffy offers an insight into the character's unsuccessful masculine performance and amorphously gendered nature. Mr. Duffy's house is described as "somber," his floors are "uncarpeted" and his walls are "free from pictures" (317). "Black" and "iron"—dual signifiers for masculinity—appear again and again in Mr. Duffy's furnishings: "black iron bedstead," "iron washstand," "a fender and irons," and "a black and scarlet rug" (317). Each black item in the room, however, is matched by an opposing white item, reflecting Mr. Duffy's conflicting impulses. Mr. Duffy's bookcase is made of "white wood," his bed is covered in "white bedclothes," and a "white-shaded lamp" is the "sole ornament of [his] mantelpiece" (317). Looking around the room at the furniture that "[h]e had himself bought" (317), Mr. Duffy's outlook on life is literally black and white. He views life through the stark binary oppositions of rationality/irrationality and stoicism/hysteria. Anything that he classifies as "black" becomes privileged as masculine—traditional bedstead, utilitarian washstand, practical fender and irons, and pointedly functional rug—while anything that he classifies as "white" becomes associated with femininity and dreaded hysteria—decorative bookcase shelves, soft bedclothes, and a condemningly ornamental lamp. However,

the presence of both black and white objects in the physical space of his room exposes Mr. Duffy's flawed gender performance and reveals him to be equally rational and irrational, stoic and hysterical, and, by the extension of his gendered logic, both masculine and feminine. Mr. Duffy strives so hard to remove himself from emotion and the threat of hysteria that he even separates his rationality from his physicality, "liv[ing] at a little distance from his body" while simultaneously "regarding his own acts with doubtful side-glances" (318). His habit of composing sentences about himself in the third person and in the past tense reflects his separation of mind from body as well as the classical binary that privileges writing over speech (318). Because Mr. Duffy's performance of masculinity depends on his ability to perform rationality, the threat of hysteria—that deadly combination of emotion and irrationality—is the threat to undermine his performance of masculinity. As a result, Mr. Duffy is particularly vulnerable to intrusive emotion because to risk performing hysteria is to completely dismantle his gendered identity.

Mr. Duffy exploits his relationship with Mrs. Sinico as an opportunity to prove his own performance of masculinity to himself. In this role, Mr. Duffy only views Mrs. Sinico as an audience or background for his own egocentric performances. Judith Butler uses the metaphor of theatre to explain the way gender is performed in her essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution." She compares gender to a role that an actor plays rather than any essential quality of the actor (906). Expanding on this

metaphor, Mr. Duffy's performance of masculinity cannot be real unless he has an audience. In his relationship to Emily Sinico, Mr. Duffy finds that audience. However, Mr. Duffy's relationship to Mrs. Sinico is inherently dangerous: as a feminine audience she has the ability to affirm Mr. Duffy's performance of masculinity but as a potentially hysterical woman she also has the ability to radically undermine that performance.

Mr. Duffy's first meeting with Mrs. Sinico outlines his relationship with her as performative for the rest of the story. He consistently relates to her in an intellectualized, dispassionate way while she repeatedly attempts to relate to him in more intimate, personal ways. Consistent with Mr. Duffy's emotional and relational detachment, Mrs. Sinico is the one who initiates their relationship. In the only instance of direct address in the story, Mrs. Sinico—at a concert that both she and Mr. Duffy happen to be attending—observes: “What a pity there is such a poor house tonight! It's so hard on people to have to sing to empty benches” (319). Unfortunately, Emily Sinico has unknowingly predicted her own role within the story. Mr. Duffy, as a man defined by his furniture, is immediately associated with empty benches. This self-described “outcast from life's feast” (325) is emotionally and relationally empty just like the benches and the furniture that he buys. Mrs. Sinico, in contrast, is immediately associated with the singer. Her love of music causes her to come into contact with Mr. Duffy and she continues to be connected to music—at least in Mr. Duffy's mind—for the rest of the story. After Mr. Duffy ends his

relationship with Mrs. Sinico, he “[keeps] away from concerts lest he should meet her” (321), firmly linking her with musicality and the performance of music. Mr. Duffy’s initial “liking for Mozart’s music” which “brought him sometimes to an opera or a concert” (318) at the beginning of the story indicates emotional sympathies which Emily Sinico later comes to represent. Indeed, Mr. Duffy’s habit of attending concerts is described as “the only dissipation of his life” (318) and the only detail of his description which hints toward Mr. Duffy’s emotional vulnerabilities.

In contrast, Mr. Duffy first relates to Mrs. Sinico by analytically assessing her like a new furniture purchase. He appraises her based on the dual criterion of feminine beauty and sex appeal and masculine rationality—demanding that she perform both masculine and feminine gender roles at the same time. He finds Mrs. Sinico to possess a “temperament of great sensibility” and a face that exhibits “intelligence” (319). Mr. Duffy’s later pseudo-philosophical reflection that “[l]ove between man and man is impossible because there must not be sexual intercourse and friendship between man and woman is impossible because there must be sexual intercourse” (321) manifests his expectation that a true companion should be able to perform multiple genders at once. However, contradicting this expectation, he also evaluates her in explicitly sexual terms, confining her to the performance of femininity. He immediately deduces her age as “a year or so younger than himself”—making her a possible sexual partner— while imperiously deciding that her face “must have been handsome,” and casually

noting that her “bosom [is] of a certain fullness” (319). Mr. Duffy expects Mrs. Sinico to perform multiple genders simultaneously in order to balance his need for emotional validation with his fear of emotional hysteria and retreat into hyper-rationality.

Throughout the story, Mrs. Sinico successfully performs gender multiplicity and healthy relational capacities while Mr. Duffy performs gender stagnation and an anesthetized approach to relationships. Mrs. Sinico is successfully able to navigate both rationality and emotional competency while Mr. Duffy rejects all forms of emotional expression to protect his tenuously enacted performance of hyper-rational masculinity. Mr. Duffy is able to relate to Mrs. Sinico only through rationality: he “share[s] his intellectual life with her” through “books” and “ideas” (319). Emily Sinico, in contrast, attempts to cultivate a more personal relationship with Mr. Duffy. “In return for his theories” she gives him “some fact of her life” which he is unable to appreciate or reciprocate (319-320). All of the verbs used to describe Mr. Duffy’s relationship to Mrs. Sinico are active: he “entangle[s] his thoughts with hers,” lends books, provides ideas, and shares “intellectual life” (319). Mrs. Sinico is only able to relate to Mr. Duffy with a single passive verb construction: “She listened to all” (319). In her passive state, Mrs. Sinico becomes an audience for Mr. Duffy’s gender performance.

Mr. Duffy’s relationship with Mrs. Sinico ends abruptly, however, as soon as Mrs. Sinico reaches through the stage curtain to intrude upon Mr. Duffy’s performance

of masculinity. Mrs. Sinico's moment of action in which she grasps Mr. Duffy's hand "passionately" (320) and presses it to her cheek is a transgressive breach of the separation between performer and audience that Mr. Duffy has so carefully maintained. This act of passion is everything that threatens Mr. Duffy's masculinity—it is spontaneous, uncontrolled, emotional, and irrational. Mr. Duffy's immediate reaction is panicked and instinctive. He cuts off contact with Mrs. Sinico sharply, refusing to visit her for a week and becoming disillusioned with their relationship. In contrast to his earlier insistence that he visit her at her home instead of meeting her outside in parks—citing a "distaste for underhand ways" (310), Mr. Duffy's final arrangements involve an outdoor rendezvous "in a little cake shop near the Parkgate" (320). Here they formally break off their relationship and Mr. Duffy rejects all human contact as "a bond to sorrow" (321). Upon their final parting, Mrs. Sinico has an emotional reaction that Mr. Duffy interprets as hysteria. Walking toward the tram to leave, Mrs. Sinico begins "to tremble so violently that, fearing another collapse on her part, [Mr. Duffy] bade her good-by quickly and left her" (321). Symptomatic of their relationship, Mr. Duffy's first instinct is not concerned with Mrs. Sinico's health but with his own tenuous gender construction. In order to protect his emotional detachment from the threat of hysteria (which he apparently believes is more contagious than a common cold) Mr. Duffy flees all contact with Emily Sinico to retreat once again into his realm of rationality.

By examining this reaction to hysteria and others,

it becomes clear that Mr. Duffy associates hysteria with sexuality. As a result, Mr. Duffy fears any and all sexual contact that may lead to hysteria. Mr. Duffy's anxieties about sexual relationships and hysteria are reflected in Luce Irigaray's categorization of women as Mother, Virgin, and Prostitute in her essay "Women on the Market." Although Irigaray specifically defines these categories as relating to the value of women in the marketplace, they are usual divisions for understanding the way Mr. Duffy conceptualizes the roles of women. As a married woman and mother, Mrs. Sinico naturally falls into Irigaray's category of Mother (809). For Irigaray, Mothers are excluded from exchange because they have already been claimed by their husbands (809). Irigaray's Mother is both non-sexual and non-hysterical: "Their responsibility is to maintain the social order without intervening so as to change it" (807). As long as Mrs. Sinico remains in this limited role as Mother, her relationship to Mr. Duffy is non-threatening. However, as soon as Mrs. Sinico attempts to exercise sexuality outside of the bounds of marriage by catching Mr. Duffy's hand to her cheek, Mr. Duffy automatically classifies her as a Prostitute and flees the threat of hysteria that a Prostitute represents. Irigaray's Prostitute is characterized by "seductiveness" that exists "to arouse the consumer's desire" (808). She is explicitly emotional and sexual: her role has been defined in such a way that she creates both emotional upheaval and sexual desire in men. Although sexuality is often associated with masculine gender roles, Mr. Duffy interprets sexuality as an inherent threat to his masculinity. Because Mr. Duffy's

masculinity depends on rationality, the inherently emotional nature of sex makes it directly opposed to his masculinity.

Judith Butler describes gender performance as “a project which has cultural survival at its end” (903). Especially in the world of “A Painful Case,” gender is a performance with what Butler calls “clearly punitive consequences” (903). Read through Butler’s framework of gender performance as cultural survival, Mrs. Sinico’s death can be interpreted as a direct result of hysteria. Although she is technically killed when she is hit by a train while crossing the tracks at a railroad station, the newspaper article which reports her death lists the actual cause of death as “shock and a sudden failure of the heart’s action” (323). Based on centuries of faulty medical understanding that defined hysteria as a uniquely female medical complaint with symptoms including emotional shock and weakness of the heart, it is hard to read this description of death as anything other than hysterical. While specifically referring to a railroad track, the fact that Mrs. Sinico is killed while “attempting to cross the line” can be easily read as an attempt to cross gender lines (322). Mary Lowe-Evans observes that the details of Mrs. Sinico’s death “conjure an image of a diminished, Emma-like woman desperate to break through the boundaries (cross the lines) of a space (her own circumscribed life, perhaps)” (397). In this attempt Mrs. Sinico is struck down as punishment for attempting to perform gender qualities outside of her narrow role as Mother. It is this same act of “crossing the line” in her relationship with Mr. Duffy that causes him to label and

reject her as hysterical. Mrs. Sinico's death by train is an indictment of her earlier injury caused by Mr. Duffy's rebuff. Mr. Duffy and the Kingstown train play the same role in ending Emily Sinico's life.

After reading the newspaper account detailing "The Painful Case" of Mrs. Sinico, Mr. Duffy has a hysterical reaction to the news of her death. Mirroring the emotional activity that Mr. Duffy interpreted as hysterical in Mrs. Sinico, Mr. Duffy spends the remainder of the story in a state of extreme emotional instability and irrationality. Mr. Duffy abandons his formerly restrained choice of words to unleash a flurry of exclamations and exaggerations: "What an end!" (323); "His soul's companion!" (324); "Just God, what an end!" (324); "But that she could have sunk so low!" (324). His emotional state renders him completely unable to finish his dinner and he rushes home in order to compose himself (323). He then reacts vindictively against Emily Sinico, distorting and questioning his own supposedly rational memory of her to wonder if it could be possible that "he had deceived himself so utterly about her" (324). From this point, Mr. Duffy turns to alcohol to deal with his emotional disturbance. Unwittingly mirroring Mrs. Sinico's reaction to the end of her relationship with Mr. Duffy four years earlier, Mr. Duffy goes to the nearest public-house and drinks whiskey punch alone. In the same park where he and Mrs. Sinico last saw each other, he imagines her presence in the darkness, feeling "her voice touch his ear" and "her hand touch his" (325). By the time Mr. Duffy is jealously bemoaning his fate in the silence of night, he has

succumbed to full emotional hysteria and has dismissed both his rationality and his performance of masculinity.

Mr. Duffy's state of hysteria reveals his former performance of masculinity to be nothing other than a sham. This reading of the ending of "A Painful Case" reveals Mr. Duffy to be an essentially hysterical character who gives an unconvincing performance of hyper-rational masculinity. At the abrupt and emotional ending of his relationship with Mrs. Sinico, Mr. Duffy exhibits a hysterical reaction to the fear of hysteria. When confronted with any emotion that threatens to undermine his performance of masculinity, Mr. Duffy always chooses to flee. However, it is not emotional instability or his relationship with Mrs. Sinico that triggers hysteria in Mr. Duffy; it is his irrational fear of hysteria. Mr. Duffy's insecurity about his performance of masculinity ironically prompts him to perform the hysteria he associates with femininity. Using deconstructive logic, the case of Mr. Duffy shows hysteria to be both unrelated to either masculinity or femininity and a false description of emotional stimulation itself.

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