

# Joyce, the Straight Old Josses:

An Analysis of James Joyce's Proximate-Homosexual Subtexts

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Using radically sexual imagery, James Joyce often detailed images that were beyond his time. In fact, a number of relationships that he describes have only recently garnered well-defined terminologies. This is especially true for proximate-homosexual subtexts, which are present in the literature of James Joyce but cannot be described by currently accepted academic terminology. In fact, by utilizing aspects of the human experience that were not recognized or acknowledged, James Joyce promoted a pre-academic spectrum of sexuality. This spectrum has pulsed underneath the surface of global literature for centuries, featuring sexualities that range from homoromantic to homoerotic to nearly homosexual. By comparing Joyce with his important Irish literary predecessor, Oscar Wilde, one can identify essential commentary on homoromantic aspects of male-male friendship in *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*. Yet, as other scholars have asserted, Joyce rarely, if ever, writes explicitly about the homosexual experience. Despite the progressive stance that Joyce takes regarding homoromantic relationships, his writing suffers from a disheartening representation of homoerotic and homosexual coding.

First, it is important to note that Joyce did not contribute significantly to homosexual themes in literature, even though such themes have been widely recognized for millennia. In Plato's *Symposium*, homosexual relationships are recognized and accepted:

But they who are a section of the male follow the male, and while they are young, being slices of the original man, they hang about men and embrace them...And when one of them meets with his other half, the actual half of himself, whether he be a lover of youth

or a lover of another sort, the pair are lost in an amazement of love and friendship and intimacy, and one will not be out of the other's sight.

More than 2200 years after *Symposium* was written, Oscar Wilde published *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Both *Symposium* and the literature of Oscar Wilde demonstrate the general timelessness of 'homosociality.' Homosociality "summarizes a way of life... that isolated men and women into separate spheres," especially in societies that expressed outward "homophobia of many homosocial formations" ("Homoeroticism..."). Evidence of this previously-described homophobia can be found in the fact that Oscar Wilde was put on trial and persecuted for his description of homosocialization in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The social structures that Wilde described were by no means inventive or false. Scholars point out that in Victorian Society, "hand-holding (was) common among earlier male friends," which is chronicled by "vintage photographs consistently" ("Homoeroticism..."). Surely, then, Oscar Wilde was not inventive or obscene in describing homoromantic relationships that sprung from homosocial spheres.<sup>1</sup>

But what are homoromantic relationships? This paper has utilized and will continue to utilize both academic terms such as homoerotic and pre-academic terms such as homoromantic. The term 'homoromantic' is pre-academic in the sense that it has not yet emerged in the scholarly community. Moreover, I contend that it is pre-academic because as scholars come to understand homo- and heteromanticism, it will enter scholarship and produce new forms of literary criticism which have been overlooked by previously incomplete understandings of queer

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that homosocialization does not inherently involve any sort of attraction, but rather it describes a setting. Homoromanticism, homoeroticism, and homosexuality, on the other hand, all involve varying degrees of attraction.

literary theory. Such terminology is important to provide a descriptive spectrum which analyzes a number of literary relationships that approach, but do not become, homosexual in the writings of James Joyce (and other authors). ‘Homoromantic’ refers to relationships in which individuals are attracted “to the same sex in a romantic way, but not necessarily in a sexual way”

(“Homoromantic”). An example of this would be a deep longing that surpasses friendship between two men or two women. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Basil describes his relationship with Dorian:

I know he likes me. Of course I flatter him dreadfully. I find a strange pleasure in saying things to him that I know I shall be sorry for having said. As a rule, he is charming to me, and we sit in the studio and talk of a thousand things.

Their relationship is “quite a romance, a romance of art one might call it,” but there is no sexual dimension to it. Even in the history of the Catholic Church, there are similar, well-documented relationships. The deep friendship between St. Francis of Assisi and St. Clare might be characterized as *heteroromantic*, as the two sought the deep companionship and intimacy of partners, without the sexual aspect of such a union (Cantalamesa). However, the best description of such a union can be found in the writings of *Symposium*:

These are the people who pass their whole lives together; yet they could not explain what they desire of one another. For the intense yearning which each of them has towards the

other does not appear to be the desire of lover's intercourse, but of something else which the soul of either evidently desires and cannot tell. (Plato)

Despite this age-old description, scholars have never written on '*homoromanticism*' in any context; however, it is gaining prevalence in the LGBTQ+ community because it addresses a gap between platonic friendship and homoerotic relationships.

Stepping beyond 'homoromantic,' the term homoerotic "refers to same-sex desire" which is often unacknowledged, and entirely unacted upon. In the Bible, David and Jonathan demonstrate a timeless homoerotic relationship. 1 Samuel 18 describes an oft-referred to homoerotic tension between the two friends:

As soon as he had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. And Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father's house. Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. And Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was on him and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt.  
*(Holy Bible)*

Likewise, In 2 Samuel 1:26, David mourns Jonathan's death, stating "your love to me was extraordinary, surpassing the love of women." This clearly indicates a relationship that is not fully sexual yet surpasses friendship or even longing because it has clear physical dimensions. 'Homoromantic' and 'homoerotic' are part of a spectrum of *proximate*-homosexual identities, as

evidenced by the previously given examples. Engaging outside literature and ancient examples such as this are important to indicate that simply because terminology isn't widely accepted in academia, this does not mean that it is not an authentic and accurate representation of the human experience. The full intimate desire of two same-sex individuals may not fully manifest due to social restraints, misplaced shame, or other reasons, and hence their relationship would approach, but would not become, homosexual in nature.

Returning to the writings of James Joyce, one can utilize the same spectrum of sexuality which I have identified to decode a number of scenes in his literature. Joyce details homoromantic, homoerotic, and proximate-homosexual relationships. Yet the distinctive manner in which he describes each relationship is vital to understanding Joyce's intentions and biases.

Homosocialization is ubiquitous in nearly every single one of Joyce's writings. In "A Little Cloud," Little Chandler and Gallaher interact exclusively with each other and a male bartender, with Gallaher refusing an invitation to meet Chandler's wife (*Dubliners* 32). Likewise, in "Grace," Mr. Kernan is prompted by three of his friends (all men) to attend "a retreat...Father Purdon is giving...for business men" (*Dubliners* 70). Even the schools which individuals attend in *Dubliners* are single gender, with instructors who are priests (7). The same educational dynamic can be found in *A Portrait of The Artist as a Young Man*, in which "the wide playgrounds were swarming with boys" (2).

Stepping into these homosocial environments reveals a few important homoromantic relationships. Joyce primarily characterizes homoromanticism as a youthful male-male manifestation. In *Ulysses*, Joyce tells the story of a group of young intellectuals. From the first page, this homosocial all-male group evokes homoromantic interactions. Buck Mulligan,

wearing an “ungirdled” dressing gown states, “*Introibo ad altare Dei*” (*Ulysses* 3). Readers of the text likely realize that the unspoken response to this is ‘*Ad Deum qui laetificat juventutem meam.*’ The Latin verse and response translate to “I shall go in to the altar of God, the God who gives joy to my youth.” The homoromantic aspects of this scene take the form of a scantily-clad man, making an offering (a bowl of shaving cream) to his friend. His words are clearly uttered mockingly, yet they indicate that Stephen Dedalus “gives joy” to Buck Mulligan’s “youth.”

Along this vein, Mulligan calls his friends “O dearly beloved,” another distorted religious reference. Taken on their surface, these scenes may be interpreted as simply comical or heretical. Yet this interpretation fails to account for a specific symbol which Joyce coded into the text: Hellenism. When discussing each other’s names, Buck Mulligan states, “it has a Hellenic ring, hasn’t it?” (*Ulysses* 4). In ascribing a Hellenistic nature to an essential part of the character’s identity, Joyce builds upon previous coding to give the scene a homoromantic nature. In the past, scholars have recognized “the phenomenon of Hellenism as a homoerotic code during the Victorian time” (Muriqi 7). Wilde was one of the first authors to code Hellenism in this way, and considering Joyce’s understated use of it in this scene, readers can ascribe meaning to it without overstating the symbol to be fully indicative of homoeroticism. In short, the text seems to indicate that the two male friends do not want anything more than the intimacy of a special, artistic bond which surpasses friendship.

A second homoromantic subtext can be found in what one scholar argued was a “David and Jonathan” relationship (Norris 369) between Stephen Dedalus and Cranly. While the passage is ambiguous, the two speak of loneliness. Cranly offers himself as a type or “adoring acolyte” (Norris 369): “And not to have one person, Cranly said, who would be more than a friend, more

even than the noblest and truest friend a man had ever had” (*A Portrait* 255). While the two men do not have any romantic involvement, Stephen is “thrilled by his touch” (*A Portrait* 254), which indicates that this offer of a nonsexual ‘more than friend’ has homoromantic undertones.

Progressing along the sexual spectrum, Joyce characterizes homoeroticism as a relatively older subtext. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen Dedalus approaches his rector because his glasses break. The interaction between the rector, an older person of power, and Stephen, has clear homoerotic elements. As “the rector held his hand across the side of the desk,” Stephen “felt a cool moist palm” (55). This strange touching between a younger boy and an older man is clearly intended to stem from the rector’s nature as a celibate, Roman Catholic priest. The privacy in which the two interact is not intended as a safeguard but as a window, in which Joyce ascribes pervertedness to a priest’s interaction with the young boy. Notably, the priest is advanced in years compared to the previously analyzed homoromantically-coded characters.

Likewise, in *Dubliners*, Joyce describes another coded homoerotic encounter between two young schoolboys and an older male. In “An Encounter” the first hint at such coding takes the form of the color green. Many individuals recognize the green carnation to be representative of closeted homosexuality. Oscar Wilde “intended the green carnation to be a badge of homosexuality that would be recognised only by those in the know” (Ellevsen). In Wilde’s literature, and we can assume later Irish literature such as that of Joyce, the color green may be symbolic of this secret ‘badge.’ In “An Encounter,” when the young narrator “came back and examined the foreign sailors to see had any of them green eyes,” there is an initial, unexplained longing (*Dubliners* 9). The meaning of this longing, this searching for green eyes, becomes clearer as the boy chews “one of those green stems on which girls tell fortunes” (*Dubliners* 9).



The act of chewing such a stem indicates the destruction (i.e. rejection) *as well as* the adoption of a feminine symbol. When paired with the color green, this indicates a contemplative, almost unconscious rejection of traditional masculinity in favor of a more nuanced identity. Finally, the schoolboys experience “jaded thoughts” (*Dubliners* 9). The word jaded evokes images of jade, which is a deep green color. Understanding these coded symbols proves vital to interpreting later dialogue in “An Encounter.”

The “queer old jossler” who eventually approaches and interacts with the young boys in “An Encounter” is described by proximate-homosexual coding. The man “came along by the bank with his hand on his hip” and wore “a suit of greenish-black” (*Dubliners* 9). He strikes up a conversation with the two school-boys, asking “which of (the boys) had the most sweethearts” (*Dubliners* 9). Mahony, the narrator’s friend, has three sweethearts, but interestingly the narrator has none. This lack of female partnership is emphasized by the jossler’s subsequent comments. He smiles and says that “Every boy...has a little sweetheart” (*Dubliners* 9). This comment serves to alienate and emasculate the narrator, as if not having a sweetheart automatically calls into question the boy’s straightness.

In the subsequent conversation, the “queer old jossler” describes how much he likes “looking at a nice young girl.” Despite this heteronormative comment, the narrator notes that “he (the old man) gave...the impression that he was repeating something which he had learned by heart” (*Dubliners* 10). Thus far in the interaction, it is clear that the “queer old jossler” has, in a way, outed the narrator. Furthermore, the older man himself has an uncanny interest in the boy’s heterosexuality and attempts to produce a false heterosexual identity for himself.

The coding in “An Encounter” proceeds to paint an image of near-homosexual desires. The narrator’s friend, Mahony, runs off, leaving the narrator with the “queer old josses.” At last, the protagonist encounters the green eyes for which he was previously searching: “As I did so I met the gaze of a pair of bottle-green eyes peering at me from under a twitching forehead” (*Dubliners* 10). This passage reiterates the importance of green as a coded symbol. The fact that the young narrator finally encounters green eyes in a homoerotically coded character is strong evidence that green as a symbol is referential to Oscar Wilde’s use of the symbol. Furthermore, directly after the boy meets the gaze of the “bottle-green” eyes, the “queer old josses” proceeds to explain “there was nothing in this world he would like so well as” to “give (a boy) ...such a whipping as no boy ever got in this world” (*Dubliners* 10). There is clearly nothing coincidental about this exchange nor the previously identified symbolism in “An Encounter.”

While Joyce primarily contributed to revealing the spectrum of proximate-homosexual relationships in an implicit manner, he does make one explicit reference to homosexuality in the form of an ostensible rejection. In “A Painful Case,” Mr. Duffy writes that “Love between man and man is impossible because there must not be sexual intercourse” (*Dubliners* 45). Upon a surface reading of this excerpt, one might assert that Joyce is rejecting all homosexuality; however, in this specific case there is actually a dimension of longing to Mr. Duffy’s writing. It is almost as if Mr. Duffy is responding to the structures that have reinforced homosocialization — the same structures which unjustly discriminated against the relationships that result from homosocialization. Mr. Duffy states “there *must not be* intercourse” (emphasis added), as if an outside entity says so. Importantly, Mr. Duffy writes this in his journal after breaking off a relationship with a woman. He is filtering through his desires, trying to find his identity.

Considering the prevalence of the Catholic Church in *Dubliners* and Irish culture, it becomes obvious that someone else has forced a homophobic perspective on Mr. Duffy, leaving him unfulfilled.

While James Joyce's writings allude to a number of proximate-homosexual encounters, the encounters become increasingly perverted as they approach full homosexuality. The previously described homoerotic scenes involve older individuals preying on younger boys. In contrast to the homoromantic scenes, they depict subtle yet inappropriate dialogue and acts. It appears that Joyce is willing to portray friendship between younger men as healthfully homoromantic, but anything further only manifests in predatory older men. By failing to ever represent a healthy homoerotic encounter, Joyce does a grave disservice to queer readers. Furthermore, the one explicit reference to homosexuality that Joyce makes does not describe a homosexual encounter at all; rather, it is an explicit rejection of homosexuality, and a reader may not properly interpret the underlying dynamics of the reference. One may find hope, however, in the fact that Joyce rightly describes homoromantic encounters in a more beautiful light. Such encounters have been documented in literature for millennia and are an essential aspect of the human experience despite a lack of academic terminology. They have pulsed underneath the surface of religious texts and classical mythology, remaining overlooked and underappreciated.

A progressive author in so many other respects, Joyce stumbles by misrepresenting aspects of the queer experience through acts of omission. Further evidence of his bias exists in an essay he wrote concerning Oscar Wilde, in which he refers to Wilde's sexuality as a "strange problem" (*Il Piccolo della Sera*). Such a comment, when paired with this essay's analysis, implies that Joyce may have been quick to judge that which he did not understand. Some may

claim that Joyce's stances are simply the consequences of his time. While this may be true, it is important to recognize, document, and shine light on Joyce's sometimes positive, but often disheartening, portrayal of the sexual spectrum.

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