

# A Painful Case



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JAMES JOYCE

James Joyce was one of the most groundbreaking and influential writers of the early 20th century. His experimental novels and short stories redrew the boundaries of what was considered appropriate subject matter and style for fiction. The oldest of 10 children, Joyce grew up in Dublin. Though his family fell into poverty, he was able to attend Jesuit schools and later graduate from University College Dublin. Early in life, he lost faith in the Catholicism he had been raised to believe, and his lapsed faith influenced his works that criticize the church and religious hypocrisy. He attempted to study medicine but gave it up to pursue writing and teaching. He met Nora Barnacle in 1904, who became his companion although they did not marry until 1931. Joyce was a heavy drinker, and after a series of mishaps, in 1904 he and Nora emigrated to Zurich and then Italy, where he taught English. This period saw the publication of *Dubliners* and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. While living in Paris, he finished his masterwork, *Ulysses*, the novel that established his reputation as a leading avant-garde writer of the time due to its stream-of-consciousness style, shifting points of view, and nonlinear narration. Joyce had poor eyesight and suffered from eye problems, eventually leading to nine operations attempting to repair his vision. In 1941, after undergoing surgery for an ulcer, Joyce died at 58 years old.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

*Dubliners* was written at a time when Irish nationalism was sweeping the country. Ireland had been colonized by England for hundreds of years and officially incorporated into the United Kingdom in 1800. In the 19th century, religious divisions between Protestants and Catholics as well as national sentiment led to increasing agitation for Irish home rule and even independence. This political activism culminated in rebellion in the 1910s that led to the formation of the Irish Free State in 1922. In its focus on the daily lives of Dublin citizens, *Dubliners* reflects the period's interest in the Irish experience and nationalism. The conflict, confusion, and change experienced by the characters mirror the political unrest of Ireland more generally. In "A Painful Case," Mr. Duffy is interested in political work but feels alienated from those pursuing it. *Dubliners* also exemplifies traits of Modernism, the literary movement dominating the early and mid-20th century. Modernist writers questioned conventional morality and pioneered stylistic innovations intended to reflect the disconnection and flux of the modern age. "A Painful Case" is stylistically innovative in its use of an invisible narrator, one

who recedes into the background to allow the thoughts of the characters to come to the fore. This writing choice contrasts with the intrusive narrator of much 19th-century fiction, who comments on the story as if speaking for the author.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"A Painful Case" is the eleventh story in Joyce's collection of 15 short stories, *Dubliners*. These stories portray the lives of working class and middle-class people in Dublin in the early 1900s, subject matter that can be seen as a predecessor to the "kitchen sink realism" of the mid-20th century. This British artistic movement portrayed ordinary people disillusioned with modern society, often focusing on the struggles of the working-class much like those in Joyce's works. Well-known kitchen sink works include John Osborne's [Look Back in Anger](#) and Shelagh Delaney's [A Taste of Honey](#). Like *Dubliners*, Joyce's other early work *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* was fairly conventional in its writing style. However, in both there are subtle examples of the experimental styles that would characterize his later novels, *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. Experimenting with form and narrative was quintessential to literary Modernism—like Joyce, other Modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf ([To the Lighthouse](#)), T.S. Eliot (*The Waste Land*), and Gertrude Stein (*Tender Buttons*) utilized stream of consciousness, unconventional narrators, dense wordplay, and other avant-garde techniques to subvert traditional norms of literature.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** A Painful Case
- **When Written:** 1905
- **Where Written:** Trieste, Italy
- **When Published:** 1914
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** Dublin, Ireland
- **Climax:** Mr. Duffy learns of Mrs. Sinico's death and realizes that he is utterly alone.
- **Antagonist:** Mrs. Sinico
- **Point of View:** Third Person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Far from Home.** Joyce lived in self-imposed exile from Ireland, residing in Italy, France, and Switzerland for most of his life. However, all his writings are set in Ireland, and many of his characters are similar to friends, family members and acquaintances he knew there.

**Bloody Compromise.** *Dubliners* was notoriously difficult to get published. Begun in 1905, it was not published in full until 1914, including stories written in the interim. Joyce submitted the book to 15 different publishers and had to promise to revise parts of it (including removing the word “bloody,” regarded by one publisher as obscene).



## PLOT SUMMARY

Mr. Duffy is a middle-aged man who lives a quiet, ordered, and isolated life in a suburb of Dublin, as far from the city as possible. His **home** is austere and unadorned. Duffy appears somewhat unfriendly and unforgiving, and he always seems to be disappointed in other people. His habits are orderly, regular, and repetitive: he works as a bank cashier, eats in the same restaurant every day, spends his free time alone or attending concerts, and only sees family on special occasions. Duffy prefers this life of distance from other people and social obligations.

His life changes, though, when one night at a concert he meets Mrs. Emily Sinico, a middle-aged, married woman with one daughter. Defying conventions, she strikes up a conversation with Duffy, and after meeting again at another event, they get to know each other better. Though she is married, Mrs. Sinico does not warn Duffy away, and they begin to meet regularly at Mrs. Sinico’s house. Mrs. Sinico is somewhat starved for companionship, since her husband, Captain Sinico, is often away at sea. Moreover, he has lost interest in his wife romantically, so he does not perceive Duffy as a rival. He actually thinks Duffy visits in order to court their daughter, Mary Sinico.

Duffy and Mrs. Sinico become very close, giving each other the companionship they both need and engaging in intellectual conversations that they both value. One night, however, the relationship changes forever. As Duffy describes his belief that human souls must always be lonely, Mrs. Sinico takes his hand and presses it to her cheek. Shocked, Duffy interprets this gesture as a sexual overture. He cuts off contact with her for a week, later meeting and breaking off the relationship completely. Mrs. Sinico is visibly disturbed, trembling and almost collapsing.

Four years go by, and Duffy’s life returns to order and isolation. He avoids going to concerts for fear of meeting Mrs. Sinico. One night while eating dinner, he chances to read an article in the newspaper called “Death of a Lady at Sydney Parade: A Painful Case.” It describes Mrs. Sinico’s death in a train accident. She had been trying to cross the tracks when she was struck and killed by a slow-moving train. It is unclear if she was hit by accident or if she committed suicide. The article gives some background on what led to the accident. Captain Sinico says that two years prior, Mrs. Sinico’s habits had begun to change.

Mary Sinico specifies that her mother had begun to go out at night to purchase alcohol, a habit Mary had tried to curb by advising her mother to join a temperance league. After examining the evidence around the accident, the article ends by reporting that no blame for it was assigned to anyone.

After reading the article, Duffy wanders through the city, processing the news of his former companion’s tragic death. At first, he reacts with moral condemnation, thinking that her death is revolting. Her descent into alcoholism makes him feel justified in having cast her away. He questions how he could have ever felt such a degraded to person to be “his soul’s companion.” Then, Duffy’s mind begins to wander. He goes to a pub and orders a drink, then another, and sits for a while reflecting on his time with Mrs. Sinico. The reality of her death hits him, and he asks himself if he could have done something to prevent it. He thinks that she was probably very lonely after they stopped seeing each other, and realizes that he’s going to spend the rest of his life in the same kind of loneliness.

Duffy leaves the pub and wanders the city, his feelings intensifying. He begins to believe that he is to blame for Mrs. Sinico’s death, thinking that his abrupt ending of their relationship prompted her alcoholism, depression, and possible suicide. Continuing to wander the city, he comes to a park and sees some people having a furtive sexual encounter. This sight drives home the point that he is completely separate from life’s greatest joys. He had a real connection with Mrs. Sinico and threw it away for the sake of propriety. More than that, he feels guilty for his actions and responsible for her death, which he now thinks that he “sentenced her to.” Then, as a train passes by, Duffy imagines hearing Mrs. Sinico’s voice in the sounds of its engine. As it fades into the distance and the night grows quiet, Duffy seems to lose his feelings of grief and connection to her memory and feels that he is, once again, alone.



## CHARACTERS

**Mr. James Duffy** – Mr. James Duffy is the story’s protagonist, a harsh and somewhat pessimistic middle-aged man. Duffy lives alone on the outskirts of Dublin, and he lives a very regimented life: he follows the same schedule every day, eats at the same restaurants, and avoids socializing and family obligations. Occasionally attending concerts is the only time he ever changes this routine. Joyce suggests from the outset that Duffy is symbolically connected to Dublin itself, by describing Duffy’s face as the same color as the city streets. Like many characters in *Dubliners*, Duffy represents something more general about life in the city. Specifically, he represents the alienation and tragedy that can result from moral superiority and sexual shame. At first, Duffy is characterized as a misanthrope—someone who dislikes other people and avoids their company. He’s not lonely, even though he rarely spends time with others. Duffy’s placid life changes, however, when he

meets a married woman named Mrs. Sinico at a concert. They develop a friendship that becomes quite close, spending evenings alone talking. Duffy fancies himself superior to others in Dublin, and in Mrs. Sinico's attention he finds the recognition he has been missing. One night, though, Mrs. Sinico makes physical contact with Duffy. This shocks him because he thinks she is making a sexual overture. Duffy is described as "living a little distance from his body," and his distaste for the physical combined with his strict moral code lead him to end his relationship with Mrs. Sinico and cut off all communication with her. When he learns of her death four years later, he is forced to reckon with this decision. Duffy shows a capacity for growth in his change of heart over Mrs. Sinico. Initially revolted by her fate, he reflects further and eventually empathizes with her sadness, blaming himself for her death. In the end, he experiences an epiphany, a sudden realization that his fear and moral rigidity have made him lose his chance at true companionship, and he is now condemned to live out his days alone.

**Mrs. Sinico** – Mrs. Emily Sinico is a middle-aged wife and mother. She is married to Captain Sinico and they have one child, Mary Sinico. She is initially characterized as warm, intelligent, and still possessing sexual vitality despite her husband's loss of interest in her. She meets Mr. Duffy while attending a concert with her daughter. She initiates conversation with him, showing her lack of regard for social conventions and desire for companionship. In their friendship, she seems to find the attention and connection that her marriage lacks. She gives Duffy the recognition he needs, listening to him talk and encouraging him to express his innermost thoughts. At one point, she reacts to a point Duffy is making by pressing her hand to his cheek, which he interprets as a sexual advance. However, the story leaves her true motivations unclear; it's possible that she might simply have been comforting him. She takes it very hard when Duffy breaks off their relationship. Four years later, Duffy reads a newspaper article about her death. The article reveals that she had taken to drinking, which possibly led to her death from being struck by a train. However, the doctor who examined her body said that her death came from "shock and sudden failure of the heart's action." This detail suggests that, symbolically, the shock of Duffy's rejection broke her heart and set her on a course toward actual death.

**Captain Sinico** – Married to Mrs. Sinico and the father of Mary Sinico, Captain Sinico is a ship's captain. He is often away from home as his boat travels between Dublin and Holland regularly. His frequent absences contribute to Mrs. Sinico's loneliness, and he has lost interest in her sexually. Captain Sinico's lack of attraction to his wife causes him to be blind to her relationship with Duffy; he cannot perceive that any man would be attracted to his wife. Ironically, he encourages Duffy to keep visiting because he thinks Duffy is courting Mary.

**Mary Sinico** – A young adult woman, Mary is the daughter of Mrs. Sinico and Captain Sinico. She attends concerts with her mother (including the one where Duffy first meets the two women) and teaches music lessons as well. In the newspaper article about Mrs. Sinico's death, Mary testifies that her mother had started drinking and going out at night to purchase alcohol. Mary had tried to help her mother and prevailed upon her to join a temperance league.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### ALIENATION AND CONNECTION

Modernist writers often explored the emotional lives of characters who are alienated in some way: estranged from others, society in general, and even cut off from themselves. In "A Painful Case," Mr. Duffy and Mrs. Sinico are both alienated, for different reasons. Duffy has chosen a solitary life and carefully arranged it to be as disconnected from other people as possible. His life is contented until meeting Mrs. Sinico. Though married with a daughter, Mrs. Sinico, like Duffy, is disconnected from true companionship—her husband, a ship's captain, is away often and undervalues her. Unlike Duffy, Mrs. Sinico yearns to escape her alienation. They strike up an unusual friendship that deepens into a genuine connection between two souls. The story shows that even in the alienating world of the modern city, a chance encounter can lead to an authentic connection between people who may not have realized how much they needed it.

Duffy has arranged his life so that he is isolated from the other citizens of Dublin, living in a suburb of the city with minimal social interaction and no friendships. He chooses **his residence** "because he wished to live as far as possible from the city of which he was a citizen," suggesting that he desires a formal connection to Dublin but doesn't want to participate in its civic life. Duffy's habits reinforce his self-imposed alienation. He works as a bank cashier, a job requiring only scripted, formal business interactions with the public. He dines in the same restaurant every day "where he fe[els] himself safe from the society of Dublin's gilded youth," showing that he perceives fashionable society with scorn and as a threat. He spends his evenings in solitary activities: playing his landlady's piano or "roaming about the outskirts of the city." His only amusement comes from occasionally attending operas or concerts where social interaction is not expected. Duffy's habits have produced the desired result of a disconnected life: "He ha[s] neither

companions nor friends, church nor creed." In Ireland at the time, people placed high value on observing the services of the Catholic Church, but Duffy merely visits relatives at Christmas and attends their funerals. He does the minimum required to fulfill "social duties for old dignity's sake," going through the motions, "but conceded[ing] nothing further to the conventions which regulate the civic life." Thus, Duffy fulfills the norms of social life, but gives nothing of himself to it.

Duffy does show an interest in political reform and a desire to connect with others pursuing it, but his snobbish attitude alienates him from other political activists. Duffy tells Mrs. Sinico that he had attended some meetings of the Irish Socialist Party. However, he stopped because he felt the other members, lower class "workmen," were too focused on their wages and therefore "timorous"—timid and fearful of working toward greater change. Duffy was unable to empathize with their concerns and felt that they resented his higher class and intellect, "the produce of a leisure not within their reach." Consequently, he has grown cynical, telling Mrs. Sinico, "No social revolution [...] would be likely to strike Dublin for some centuries." This experience led Duffy to become alienated from political discourse more generally. When Mrs. Sinico inquires if he has written about his politics, Duffy denigrates other writers as "phrasemongers, incapable of thinking consecutively for sixty seconds" and explains that he could not bear to be criticized by "an obtuse middle class," lacking morality and taste. Again, Duffy alienates himself with a superior, judgmental attitude.

Like Duffy, Mrs. Sinico is isolated and alienated from human connection. However, in her case, she did not choose this way of life, but yearns for companionship. It is implied that Mrs. Sinico's advancing age has caused her husband to lose interest in her. Though married, they have no real connection. She mentions her husband to Duffy in a way that suggests he is not jealous and would permit their budding friendship: "She alluded once or twice to her husband but her tone was not such as to make the allusion a warning." As a ship's captain, Captain Sinico is "often away," giving the Duffy and Mrs. Sinico opportunity for many private meetings. Moreover, Captain Sinico has lost interest in his wife sexually and this is why he is not jealous of Duffy's visits to their home: "He had dismissed his wife so sincerely from his gallery of pleasures that he did not suspect that anyone else would take an interest in her."

Duffy and Mrs. Sinico's chance encounter deepens into a genuine connection that enriches them both. To Duffy, "[Mrs. Sinico's] companionship [is] like a warm soil about an exotic." Like an exotic plant that can only thrive in certain conditions, Duffy's personality blooms in the "soil" of Mrs. Sinico's undivided attention and care, highlighting how nourishing human connection can be. Mrs. Sinico is also likened to his "confessor." As in a Catholic confessional, Duffy can say anything to her and, in the process, become spiritually cleansed.

Indeed, Duffy's feels spiritually elevated during their conversations: "their union exalted him" as he feels "in her eyes he would ascend to an angelical stature." Her rapt attention feeds into Duffy's egotism and sense of superiority, letting him feel his intelligence is recognized. Mrs. Sinico, in turn, benefits from being able to embody her prescribed female role of nurturing and supporting a man. She listens to Duffy "with almost maternal solicitude." She has on Duffy the softening effect women were expected to exert on men according to the gender norms of the time. Her influence "w[ears] away the rough edges of his character, emotionalise[s] his mental life." Duffy and Mrs. Sinico fit together according to the era's gender norms, with Duffy's intellect balanced by Mrs. Sinico's emotion. This unlikely pair come together in a deep connection that gives the other what they most need: Duffy gets to feel heard, and Mrs. Sinico gets to feel needed.



## SEXUAL REPRESSION

Modernist writers like Joyce often pushed the envelope in their portrayals of sexuality. In deliberate criticism of what he saw as Victorian prudishness, Joyce's writing often features frank discussion of sexuality and criticism of sexual repression. "A Painful Case" shows that strict adherence to sexual moral standards leads to sexual repression, with tragic consequences. Both Duffy and Mrs. Sinico are celibate and pursue a platonic friendship. Then, their relationship is destroyed when Duffy panics over a perceived sexual overture from Mrs. Sinico. In this plot trajectory, the story shows that conformity to strict sexuality morality and fear of sexual expression can be destructive of authentic human connection.

Duffy is initially portrayed as lacking passion and sexual desire. He is out of touch with physicality, either by choice or by nature. The imagery used in the opening paragraph to describe **Duffy's home** suggests his lack of passion. His home is "sombre," unadorned, all black and white, with only "a black and scarlet rug" at the foot of the bed. The color red connotes passion and sexuality, and the rug with its hint of red near Duffy's bed suggests that Duffy's sexuality is also only a hint, almost an afterthought. Duffy's disinterest in sexuality is further symbolized by the description of the contents of his desk. Lifting its lid causes a faint fragrance to escape, giving a sensual connotation. However, one smell from the desk is of "an overripe apple which might have been left there and forgotten." Harkening back to the Garden of Eden and "forbidden fruit" as associated with sexual knowledge, this apple represents Duffy's sexuality, which has withered away through disinterest and lack of use. Building on these symbolic references, the story states more directly that Duffy is out of touch with his physicality. He is said to live "at a little distance from his body, regarding his own acts with doubtful side-glances." He does not fully inhabit his body. Instead, he is detached and alienated

from himself: “He ha[s] an odd autobiographical habit which le[ads] him to compose in his mind from time to time a short sentence about himself containing a subject in the third person and a predicate in the past tense.”

By contrast with Duffy, Mrs. Sinico is portrayed as more sexually alive and aware. Despite lack of interest from her husband and her advancing years, she has stayed connected to sexual passion. Mrs. Sinico’s sexuality is portrayed subtly in her first physical description. Her pupils sometimes blend in with her dark blue irises, described as a “deliberate swoon of the pupil into the iris.” The word “swoon” gives Mrs. Sinico’s appearance a subtle connotation of sexuality, since to swoon means to faint or grow dizzy as a result of intense emotion or romantic interest. Her eyes also reveal “a temperament of great sensibility” or capacity for deep feeling that is only visible sometimes. This expression of feeling will fall quickly fall back “under the reign of prudence,” suggesting that Mrs. Sinico keeps her passion in check in order to conform to social norms of prudent, respectable behavior. Her clothing and body further suggest her sexual potential: “her astrakhan jacket, moulding a bosom of a certain fullness, struck the note of defiance more definitely.” Referring directly to Mrs. Sinico’s full bosom and specifying that her jacket is made of astrakhan—soft, textured fleece—further gives her appearance sensual connotations. Her physical description suggests that she is sexually awakened and therefore has the potential to defy the norms of the time.

Duffy ends their relationship completely in a moment of sexual panic, thinking that Mrs. Sinico wishes to defy social norms and have an adulterous sexual relationship with him. As Duffy holds forth one night, lecturing Mrs. Sinico on “the soul’s incurable loneliness,” she establishes physical contact with him: “Mrs. Sinico caught up his hand passionately and pressed it to her cheek.” This gesture leaves Duffy “very much surprised.” He then breaks off contact with her, not seeing her for a week. He is left “disillusioned” by Mrs. Sinico’s “interpretation” of his speech, thinking that she is expressing sexual interest in him. The word choice “disillusioned” is significant, showing that Duffy had placed Mrs. Sinico on a moral pedestal and imagining that she would commit adultery causes her to fall from it. Moreover, he has seen her as an intellectual companion, not as a sexual partner. Duffy’s action is based on his belief that Mrs. Sinico’s gesture of placing his hand on her cheek was a sexual overture. In fact, she might have merely been expressing care and concern for him in her “maternal” way, letting him know that he was not really alone. Alternatively, if she were expressing sexual interest in him, it is possible that he could have rejected her advance without panicking, judging her harshly and completely ending the relationship. Duffy’s sexual prudery, repression, and insistence on conventionally correct moral standards leads to the end of what has been a meaningful, authentic connection, and Mrs. Sinico dies a few

years later. Ultimately, the story suggests that a sexual affair between the two, though forbidden by moral and social conventions, would have been preferable to the life of isolation, tragedy, and death that results from Duffy’s sexual repression, prudery, and conformity to social scruples.



## QUESTIONING CONVENTIONAL MORALITY

Modernist narratives tend to unsettle moral frameworks. For example, at the end of most of the stories in *Dubliners*, readers are faced with either a moral problem that defies judgment or shown a character having a sudden epiphany, but it is not clear what they have learned. “A Painful Case” fits both of these patterns. In its portrayal of Mr. Duffy and Mrs. Sinico’s relationship, the story questions moral conventions regarding love, marriage, and sexuality. Additionally, the story muddies the waters with respect to Mrs. Sinico’s death, leaving its cause ambiguous and questioning Duffy’s responsibility. Finally, the story refuses to say if Duffy has had a profound realization of his lost opportunity with Mrs. Sinico or if he will simply revert back to his contented alienation. In raising these moral questions but deliberately leaving them unanswered, Joyce forces his readership to question conventional morality and grapple with their assumptions surrounding it.

Duffy and Mrs. Sinico’s unusually intimate friendship defies moral standards of the time. Duffy first meets Mrs. Sinico at a concert. Polite society required that strangers be introduced through a mutual acquaintance. When Mrs. Sinico breaks with this convention, Duffy is “surprised that she seemed so little awkward,” characterizing her behavior as unusual. When they meet again, Duffy “seize[s] the moments when her daughter’s attention [i]s diverted to become intimate.” Duffy’s hiding his attention suggests that he knows he is crossing a line. By contrast, Mrs. Sinico seems unfazed. In referring to her husband, Captain Sinico, Mrs. Sinico does not seem to be “warning” Mr. Duffy that her husband will be jealous. They continue to meet in private at “her little cottage outside Dublin,” showing that they are avoiding scrutiny but also getting away from the city’s social norms. Mrs. Sinico often neglects turning on the lamp as their evenings wear on, heightening their intimate connection: “The dark discreet room, their isolation, the music that still vibrated in their ears united them.”

Four years after breaking off his friendship with Mrs. Sinico, Duffy by chance reads a newspaper article about her death in a train accident. The details of her death given in the article leave it unclear if she committed suicide or not. Some evidence suggests accidental death: she was hit by a slow train while crossing the lines, and the medical examiner found that her injuries were not sufficient to cause death, which probably came from shock. Moreover, it is revealed that Mrs. Sinico had

taken to drinking, so it is probable that in her drunkenness, she stumbled or did not see the train coming. Other evidence hints at suicide, however. Mrs. Sinico could have avoided a slowly moving train. The doctor's finding the death due to "sudden failure of the heart's action" suggests that symbolically, Mrs. Sinico had given up on life. The story has shown Mrs. Sinico distress and alienation, so a four-year progression into alcoholism and suicide seems plausible. Moreover, it is possible that she exhibits the reckless behavior sometimes shown by people suffering from depression: not actively suicidal, yet welcoming death. Mrs. Sinico's fate is tragic, but the story refuses to specify its cause, making her fate difficult to place in a moral framework.

The newspaper article describing her death ends saying, "No blame attached to anyone." Ironically, the rest of the story narrates Duffy's coming to blame himself. He then experiences an epiphany regarding his alienation, but the nature of his realization is unclear. Duffy initially reacts to the news story with moral condemnation. The story of her death "revolt[s] him." He feels justified in casting her aside: "He had no difficulty now in approving of the course he had taken." Next, Duffy remembers his relationship with Mrs. Sinico. He questions his behavior: "He could not have carried on a comedy of deception with her; he could not have lived with her openly. He had done what seemed to him best. How was he to blame?" He begins to develop some empathy for Mrs. Sinico, imagining her loneliness. His empathy with Mrs. Sinico grows so strong that he imagines hearing her voice and feeling her touch. He takes on blame: "Why had he withheld life from her? Why had he sentenced her to death?" This self-blame causes him great distress: "He felt his moral nature falling to pieces." Duffy thinks to himself twice that "he was outcast from life's feast," suggesting that he has realized his chance for love is lost. The last line of the story, "he felt that he was alone," shows that Duffy realizes his isolation is now involuntary and permanent. On the other hand, it is possible that Duffy at the end of the story has reverted back to his contented, voluntary alienation. He sees a train and hears Mrs. Sinico's name in the sounds of its engine. However, then "he began to doubt the reality of what memory told him." He loses his imaginative connection to Mrs. Sinico: "He could not feel her near him in the darkness nor her voice touch his ear." The train moves away, and the night become "perfectly silent." This imagery suggests that it is possible Duffy has simply erased his feelings of guilt and loss and will revert back to his black-and-white life of self-imposed alienation.

The ending of "A Painful Case" is bleak and evocative, raising many questions but providing no answers. Did Mrs. Sinico die accidentally, or did she kill herself? Did Duffy's rejection of her prompt her slow decline? Is he responsible for her fate, or is he wallowing in guilt? Does Duffy now feel lonely, having finally understood what he threw away? Or has this passionless man

experienced a few hours of emotion and now gone back to his typical disconnection? In raising moral questions but not clearly answering them, the story forces readers to engage with the plot directly, questioning their own assumptions and standards for judgment.



## SYMBOLS

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



## DUFFY'S HOUSE

"A Painful Case" opens with an extended description of Mr. Duffy's house. The detailed description of his house and its furnishings symbolize Duffy's sense of superiority, his rigid, austere personality, and his sexual repression. Duffy has chosen to live on the outskirts of Dublin in a suburb because "he wished to live as far as possible from the city," and he chose his particular suburb "because he found all the other suburbs of Dublin mean, modern, and pretentious." Right away, Duffy comes off as judgmental, particular, and even misanthropic in his choice of residence. His home has "lofty walls," mirroring Duffy's lofty view of his own intellectualism and superiority to others. The home also shows his rigidity and austerity: his room is unadorned, with no carpet or pictures on the walls, and lacks any color besides black and white. Given that Duffy is isolated and sexually repressed, his plain, generic space reflects his hesitance to make his true self known to others or to himself. Duffy's sexual repression is further symbolized by two fleeting references to the color red, traditionally used to represent passion and sexuality. The foot of his bed is covered by a "black and scarlet rug." The presence of a small amount of red on Duffy's bed shows the presence of some passion, but revealed almost accidentally or as an afterthought. Moreover, when his desk is opened, "a faint fragrance escape[s]" from "an overripe apple which might have been left there and forgotten." This image hearkens to the biblical Garden of Eden and the forbidden fruit of sexual consummation. However, like this apple, Duffy's sexuality has withered from its containment.



## QUOTES

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

## A Painful Case Quotes

☞ Mr. James Duffy lived in Chapelizod because he wished to live as far as possible from the city of which he was a citizen and because he found all the other suburbs of Dublin mean, modern and pretentious. He lived in an old sombre house and from his windows he could look into the disused distillery or upwards along the shallow river on which Dublin is built.

**Related Characters:** Mr. James Duffy

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 103

### Explanation and Analysis

The opening sentences of the story introduce the protagonist, Duffy, and subtly portray some of his character traits that will be revealed later. His choice to live in Chapelizod, a distant suburb of Dublin, shows his desire to alienate himself from social life in the city, and thus he is immediately established as a loner. Moreover, this self-imposed isolation results from a judgmental, superior attitude, as demonstrated by his harsh opinion of Dublin's other suburbs. His house is introduced as "sombre" and thus begins to symbolize Duffy's serious, withdrawn personality.

Joyce frequently used allusions to other literary works to add meaning to his fiction, and he does so in locating Duffy in Chapelizod. This town name translates as "Iseult's Chapel," alluding to the tragic love story of Tristan and Isolde and foreshadowing the tragedy of Duffy's relationship with Mrs. Sinico. Other examples of foreshadowing appear in the distillery Duffy can see, which references Mrs. Sinico's alcoholism, and the view of the river, where Duffy has his final epiphany about his relationship with Mrs. Sinico years later.

☞ He lived at a little distance from his body, regarding his own acts with doubtful side-glasses. He had an odd autobiographical habit which led him to compose in his mind from time to time a short sentence about himself containing a subject in the third person and a predicate in the past tense. He never gave alms to beggars and walked firmly, carrying a stout hazel.

**Related Characters:** Mr. James Duffy

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 104

### Explanation and Analysis

The general description of Duffy continues, and he is shown to be self-alienated. That is, he is out of touch with aspects of himself. Specifically, Duffy is disconnected from his body, and by implication his sexuality. He lives very much in his head in a world of abstract ideas, as seen by his inner monologue in which he refers to himself in the third person. It is as if Duffy views himself not as a real person but as a character in a story. He is further shown to be unsympathetic and cold in his determination not to give money to homeless people on the street. His "stout hazel" or large walking stick, represents his desire to keep the world and other people in it away, to defend himself from any encroachment on his person space and intellectual independence. All of these elements together paint Duffy as a character who lives his life entirely in his own mind, utterly disconnected from those around him as well as from himself and his desires.

☞ He had neither companions nor friends, church nor creed. He lived his spiritual life without any communion with others, visiting his relatives at Christmas and escorting them to the cemetery when they died. He performed these two social duties for old dignity's sake but conceded nothing further to the conventions which regulate the civic life.

**Related Characters:** Mr. James Duffy

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 105

### Explanation and Analysis

Dublin society at this time was staunchly Catholic, and church attendance and observance of rituals were expected. Consequently, Duffy's lack of religious observance indicates how deeply runs his alienation from mainstream society and its expectations. He is not an unbeliever, however, simply preferring to follow his spiritual path without having to fellowship with others, demonstrating his deliberate choice to alienate himself from other people. He does the bare minimum expected, coming out of his isolation only when absolutely necessary: for Christmas, the principal Christian holiday, and for funerals. Saying that Duffy "conceded" or gave in to these social

expectations indicates that he feels them to be unwelcomed impositions. Although Duffy is clearly alienated from those around him, his upholding of basic religious norms suggests that he still cares about his public persona as a morally forthright individual.

●● One evening he found himself sitting beside two ladies in the Rotunda. The house, thinly peopled and silent, gave distressing prophecy of failure. The lady who sat next him looked round at the deserted house once or twice and then said:

—What a pity there is such a poor house tonight! It's so hard on people to have to sing to empty benches.

He took the remark as an invitation to talk. He was surprised that she seemed so little awkward.

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Sinico (speaker), Mr. James Duffy

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 105

### Explanation and Analysis

One of Duffy's only pleasures in life is attending concerts, and one night by chance he meets someone at a concert. This lady, later revealed to be Mrs. Sinico, breaks social convention by striking up a conversation with him. At this time, it was considered more respectable and proper that strangers be introduced by a third-party mutual acquaintance rather than meeting spontaneously, so Mrs. Sinico speaking to Duffy directly defies that norm. This action shows Mrs. Sinico's lack of concern with propriety and also her open, warm-hearted nature. It is hinted that such disregard for social rules comes easily to her since, as Duffy observes, she speaks to him without awkwardness. There is yet another instance of foreshadowing the story's tragic conclusion in the "distressing prophecy of failure" of the concert, foretold by the small crowd at the theater.

●● Her companionship was like a warm soil about an exotic. Many times she allowed the dark to fall upon them, refraining from lighting the lamp. The dark discreet room, their isolation, the music that still vibrated in their ears united them. This union exalted him, wore away the rough edges of his character, emotionalised his mental life. Sometimes he caught himself listening to the sound of his own voice. He thought that in her eyes he would ascend to an angelical stature.

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Sinico, Mr. James Duffy

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 107

### Explanation and Analysis

The relationship between Duffy and Mrs. Sinico grows from a few chance meetings in public into an intense private connection. In her company, Duffy's personality can bloom as if it were an "exotic" plant growing in the "warm soil" of her attention. The imagery of darkness and isolation in this passage suggests that their relationship exists outside the bounds of social convention and expectation. Significantly, it is Mrs. Sinico who leaves the lights off, thus creating a space where intimacy can occur without judgment. She softens Duffy's harshness and brings his ideas more into alignment with feeling. In doing so, Mrs. Sinico offers the already judgmental and egotistical Duffy the chance to feel "exalted" and "angelical," feeding into his sense of self-importance. In this sense, it seems that Mrs. Sinico's companionship may merely reinforce Duffy's flaws—namely his arrogance and self-imposed isolation—rather than challenge them.

●● He wrote seldom in the sheaf of papers which lay in his desk. One of his sentences, written two months after his last interview with Mrs. Sinico, read: Love 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.

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Sinico, Mr. James Duffy

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 108

### Explanation and Analysis

The relationship between Duffy and Mrs. Sinico becomes increasingly intimate until one night, she makes physical contact. Even though the touch is seemingly innocent—she presses Duffy's hand to her cheek—Duffy interprets this action as a sexual overture, and he cuts off the relationship. His life then mostly goes back to normal. Here, though, we get a hint that Duffy was affected by the breakup, as his habit of regular writing has slowed. Additionally, the sentence he wrote after breaking with Mrs. Sinico is significant in a few ways. First, it is written in the form of a profound moral saying, showing Duffy's tendency to

moralize and judge. However, the convoluted sentence structure, or syntax, indicates that Duffy is experiencing stress and confusion, unsettled by questions of sexuality. Finally, his writing makes crystal clear that he broke off his relationship with Mrs. Sinico because he felt she wanted to initiate a sexual relationship, rendering their friendship “impossible.” In this sense, it’s clear that Duffy is willing to limit himself and thus stymie potential fulfillment and happiness if it means avoiding the risk and vulnerability that sexual relationships inherently carry.

☛ Captain Sinico [...] also gave evidence [...] He was not in Dublin at the time of the accident as he had arrived only that morning from Rotterdam. They had been married for twenty-two years and had lived happily until about two years ago when his wife began to be rather intemperate in her habits. Miss Mary Sinico said that of late her mother had been in the habit of going out at night to buy spirits. She, witness, had often tried to reason with her mother and had induced her to join a League.

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Sinico, Mary Sinico, Captain Sinico

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 110-111

### Explanation and Analysis

Four years after parting with Mrs. Sinico, Duffy reads a newspaper article about Mrs. Sinico’s death in a train accident. During the investigation of the accident, several people were interviewed, including Captain and Mary Sinico. Their testimonies provide some background to the accident and fill in details about Mrs. Sinico’s story in the four years since her relationship with Duffy ended. Captain Sinico had been at sea when she died, continuing the pattern of his absence that led her to seek companionship from Duffy in the first place. Apparently, after ending with Duffy, she was alright for about two years but then began to act strangely. Her daughter Mary relates that Mrs. Sinico had taken to drinking alcohol. Given that she was so profoundly upset by the breakup with Duffy, it stands to reason that this incident could have prompted her alcohol abuse—a destructive habit that possibly led to her death. Given that Mrs. Sinico felt devalued and alienated from her own husband, it makes sense that losing her meaningful connection to Duffy would have such an impact on her. Therefore, Duffy’s deep-seated fear of sexuality and

overreaction to Mrs. Sinico’s innocent gesture may have inadvertently led to her alcoholism and death.

☛ Just God, what an end! Evidently she had been unfit to live, without any strength of purpose, an easy prey to habits, one of the wrecks on which civilisation has been reared. But that she could have sunk so low! Was it possible he had deceived himself so utterly about her? He remembered her outburst of that night and interpreted it in a harsher sense than he had ever done. He had no difficulty now in approving of the course he had taken.

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Sinico, Mr. James Duffy

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 111-112

### Explanation and Analysis

Duffy reflects on the news of Mrs. Sinico’s death, and the story provides access to his thoughts in language close to what could be going on in his mind. Duffy’s personality is very rigid and moralistic, so his initial reaction to the news of Mrs. Sinico’s death is to judge her harshly as a degraded drunkard despite having had a close relationship with her in which he valued and admired her deeply. Duffy’s emotions are worked up here, as shown by the exclamations he makes to himself. His judgmental nature leads him easily to see Mrs. Sinico as just another example of human frailty and vice, an extremely limiting attitude that led to him cutting off their relationship in the first place. Duffy feels lucky to have ended his association with such a degraded person, believing himself to have been “deceived” by his faith in her. In hindsight, he feels justified in having ended their relationship.

☛ It was after nine o’clock when he left the shop. The night was cold and gloomy. He entered the Park by the first gate and walked along under the gaunt trees. He walked through the bleak alleys where they had walked four years before. She seemed to be near him in the darkness. At moments he seemed to feel her voice touch his ear, her hand touch his. He stood still to listen. Why had he withheld life from her? Why had he sentenced her to death? He felt his moral nature falling to pieces.

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Sinico, Mr. James Duffy

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 113

### Explanation and Analysis

As Duffy continues to let the news about Mrs. Sinico sink in, his feelings change. Initially revolted and moralistic, he begins to imagine what her life was like in the four years since they parted, realizing that she must have been very lonely to have desperately turned to alcohol. Late in the evening, he leaves the pub where he has been pondering the past. The cityscape mirrors his emotional state: dark, lonely, empty. In Duffy's mind, Mrs. Sinico is becoming real again, to that point that he can almost hear her speak and feel her touch. This feeling of connection to his old friend prompts him to question his decision to end the relationship. For the first time, Duffy is not living according to a rigid moral code. In fact, his "moral nature" is shattered by the idea that his strict morality is ironically what led to his friend's death.

●● He turned back the way he had come, the rhythm of the engine pounding in his ears. He began to doubt the reality of what memory told him. He halted under a tree and allowed the rhythm to die away. He could not feel her near him in the darkness nor her voice touch his ear. He waited for some minutes listening. He could hear nothing: the night was perfectly silent. He listened again: perfectly silent. He felt that he was alone.

**Related Characters:** Mr. James Duffy

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 113-114

### Explanation and Analysis

Duffy has continued to wander the city and think of Mrs. Sinico and what her death means to him, eventually coming to a park where he realizes that he has been "outcast from life's feast." Unlike his earlier self-imposed, contented alienation from human connection, Duffy feels here that he is, in fact, lonely, and that he lost his one chance at real human connection with Mrs. Sinico. However, the last paragraph of the story leaves it unclear whether or not Duffy's epiphany was real. Having previously heard Mrs. Sinico's name in the sound of the train, and as it moves away, he can no longer feel her presence. This shift indicates that perhaps Mrs. Sinico's death has finally become real to Duffy. On the other hand, it is possible that Duffy has merely consigned her to memory and that he is contented to now be alone again in his repressed and alienated state.



## 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.

## A PAINFUL CASE

Mr. James Duffy lives in a suburb of Dublin called Chapelizod, as far from the city as he can get. His **house** is gloomy and unadorned with decorations. His home is all black and white in color, with only a hint of red on a rug covering the bed. His possessions are spare and well ordered, with all the books arranged by size. He owns a complete edition of Wordsworth's poetry as well as the Maynooth Catechism, and he is working on translating the German play *Michael Kramer*. When opening his desk, it smells faintly of new pencils, a bottle of gum, or "an overripe apple" that has been left in the drawer.

Duffy is very austere and rigid in his personality: He has an abhorrence of any disorder, whether in the physical world or in the realm of ideas. He is middle-aged, with "dry black hair," "an unamiable mouth," and cheekbones that give his face "a harsh character." His eyes appear seem to be looking for the good in people, though he often doesn't find it. He has a habit of describing himself in his mind the third person, and he lives "at a little distance from his body." He never gives money to beggars and carries a "stout hazel," or walking stick.

*The long, detailed description of Duffy's home and furnishings give insight into his character. Duffy is portrayed as a loner in his choice to live far from the heart of Dublin. The description of his home as colorless and spare shows Duffy to be austere and orderly, with no room for uncertainty of ambiguity. His books show him to have intellectual tendencies, and *The Maynooth Catechism*, a book of religious teachings, hints at his conventional morality. There are, however, faint indications of potential for emotion given by the setting: the red rug, the works of the Romantic poet Wordsworth, and the smells issuing from his desk are all subtle symbols for romance or sexual desire. The red apple, in particular, is associated with the biblical forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, which symbolizes temptation. In this case, the fruit has been contained and almost forgotten despite its wafting scent, suggesting that Duffy's temptations are being similarly repressed.*



*Duffy's rigid and controlling personality is reflected in his appearance: his "dry" hair suggests a lack of feeling and passion, while his mouth and cheekbones make him appear unapproachable and severe. Only his eyes show a hint of vulnerability, as his inability to find the good in people suggest that he has become alienated from others through frequent disappointment by them. Duffy's disconnect from his body and reference to himself the in the third person underscores his implied repressed sexuality, as this description suggests that he compartmentalizes his intellectuality from his physicality. His practice of referring to himself in the third person shows that he is alienated and distant from himself as well as others. This alienation and skepticism of people has rendered him guarded and unsympathetic.*



Duffy keeps very regular habits and socializes little. He works as a bank cashier and eats in the same restaurant every day. He spends his evening playing his landlady's piano, wandering the city alone, or attending concerts. He doesn't have any friends, and he does not attend church services except for Christmas and relatives' funerals. He lives out his days without adventure, though he occasionally thinks that he might rob a bank if the right circumstances ever came up.

*Like Duffy's home, his habits are very ordered: he does the same things every day in a very routine way. Moreover, his life is very solitary. His job as a cashier requires only formal interactions with the public, and he spends his free time alone or attending events where he is not expected to socialize. He is even disconnected from friends and family, only doing what is expected to honor religious observances, which suggests that he is concerned with upholding an image of propriety despite being alienated from others. However, his fantasy about robbing a bank suggests that he at least entertains the possibility of change and foreshadows his willingness to defy social conventions.*



One night at a concert he unexpectedly meets a lady. She comments on the small size of the audience, noting that it's unfortunate for the performers to have to sing to empty seats. They begin to chat, and Duffy is surprised by her lack of awkwardness. Since she is there with her daughter, Duffy judges that she is middle-aged. He observes her appearance, speculating that in her younger days, she was beautiful, though now she appears intelligent, with eyes that have "a defiant note" and show a "temperament of great sensibility."

*Mrs. Sinico is portrayed as emotional and sensitive by her first comment to Duffy in which she expresses concern for the performers, a contrast to Duffy's own unsympathetic mindset toward other people. She also comes across as spontaneous and unconcerned with social norms in her easy manner of striking up a conversation with Duffy. Given the subtle implications that Duffy himself is yearning to break with convention, the reader can infer that Duffy's interactions with the "defiant" and carefree Mrs. Sinico may spur him to do just that.*



They meet again a few weeks later at another concert, and when her daughter is distracted, Duffy takes the opportunity to get to know her better. He learns that her name is Mrs. Sinico and that she is married to a ship's captain. They meet again accidentally, at which point Duffy is brave enough to ask her to meet him intentionally, and then they begin to meet regularly. At first, they meet in quiet places, but Duffy soon insists on coming to Mrs. Sinico's house because he dislikes deception. Captain Sinico is not prompted to jealousy, however, since he no longer sees his wife as sexually appealing and assumes instead that Duffy is interested in courting the couple's daughter.

*Another meeting gives Duffy a chance to deepen his connection to Mrs. Sinico. Doing so when her daughter is not paying attention shows that he is aware he is crossing a line in socializing with a married woman. However, Duffy's rigid morality requires that they meet openly, at Mrs. Sinico's home. This arrangement works since Captain Sinico is often away. Moreover, he and his wife are emotionally and sexually distant, so when he is home, he is not jealous. Captain Sinico represents the social conventions of the time that value women for their youth and beauty, as shown by his disinterest in his middle-aged wife and his assumption that Duffy would want to court his young daughter instead. His disinterest in his wife paves the way for Duffy and Mrs. Sinico's deepening bond. She is alienated from male affection, and she is finding in Duffy what she does not get from her husband.*



Duffy and Mrs. Sinico's intimacy grows. Duffy lets her into his world: they "entangle" their thoughts together as Duffy lends Mrs. Sinico books and she listens to him as a mother would. She is also likened to "his confessor," or a Catholic priest listening to a parishioner confess their sins. He tells her that he had formerly been involved in an Irish Socialist Party but had stopped attending meetings because he felt the workmen focused too much on wages, and so their discussions were too timid for his taste. Moreover, he declines to publish his political views because he thinks of other writers as unoriginal and pandering to the ignorant middle class.

They continue to meet in private as their connection deepens. Mrs. Sinico has a softening influence on Duffy and makes him feel more in touch with his emotions. Her attention helped him to develop and open up: "Her companionship was life a warm soil about an exotic." Duffy feels like "exalted" in her presence, as if she sees him as something superhuman.

However, one night while Duffy describes philosophically how people are inevitably alone and isolated, Mrs. Sinico does something that surprises him. She takes his hand and presses it "passionately [...] to her cheek." This gesture unsettles Duffy because he's troubled by the way that she interpreted what he was saying. He cuts off contact for a week, then meets again—this time in public—to break off the friendship completely. Mrs. Sinico is upset and trembling, but Duffy, afraid that she will grow emotional again, leaves quickly. She mails his books and music back.

*Duffy and Mrs. Sinico's intimacy grows, as shown by the imagery of their thoughts being "entangled," as if their minds are vines or threads wrapping around each other. Despite this intimacy, their relationship is described in distinctly nonsexual terms, as Mrs. Sinico takes on a maternal role for Duffy and is even compared to his priest. Like someone in confession, Duffy can say anything to her, but there is still a proper decorum between them. Though Duffy reveals his interest in politics, he lacks sympathy for the workmen who were interested in bread-and-butter issues like wages. He sees them as cowardly for not taking a broader view of social change. His egotistical view of himself is further shown by his judgmental dismissing of political discourse of the time.*



*Gender norms of this time tended to portray men as more rational and women as more emotional, so they balanced each other out. Mrs. Sinico embodies her prescribed feminine role in her relationship with Duffy. Describing Duffy as an "exotic" plant shows how different he is from most of Dublin society, but in Mrs. Sinico's attention, he has found the "warm soil" that allows him to grow and flourish. She makes him feel like a better man, almost spiritually elevated, even god-like.*



*Duffy's intellectual theories can be fully expressed in Mrs. Sinico's presence due to her care and concern for him. Despite Duffy's notion that loneliness is part of the human condition, Mrs. Sinico's gesture of placing his hand on her cheek could be her way of letting him know that he is not really alone—she is there for him. However, he interprets this act as a sexual advance. Given Duffy's strict morality and disconnection from sexuality, it makes sense that he would interpret an innocent gesture in this way and abruptly end the relationship. Mrs. Sinico's distress is visible, foreshadowing her unhappiness once Duffy is out of her life.*



Four years go by, and Duffy returns to his regular habits. He has taken to reading Nietzsche, but seldom writes himself anymore. He does write a few brief lines on the impossibility of true friendship between men and women due to sexual attraction. He avoids concerts for fear of seeing Mrs. Sinico. One night while eating dinner, he comes across an article in the newspaper that gives him pause. He reads it with attention and then stops eating, pushing his food away. He leaves the restaurant and walks back to his **home**, struggling to breathe normally. Upon arriving home, he reads the article again.

*Years after cutting of contact with Mrs. Sinico, Duffy's life has returned to what it was, except that he takes steps to avoid encountering her. The detail of his reading Nietzsche shows his return to a more abstract, philosophical way of life in which he explores ideas privately rather than having intellectual dialogues. This allusion also represents the theme of moral ambiguity in the story, since Nietzsche's work questions the existence of absolute morality. Duffy has been reflecting on the ethics of his choice to cut off Mrs. Sinico due to her perceived sexual overture, but at this point he feels justified in his action. Joyce builds suspense by not revealing the content of the article Duffy reads, instead showing how profoundly it affects Duffy.*



Entitled "Death of a Lady at Sydney Parade: A Painful Case," the article describes Mrs. Sinico's death in a train accident. She was trying to cross the tracks but was struck by a slow train, injuring her head and right side. The article includes testimony from the engine driver and porter describing the incident. A doctor who examined the body found head, shoulder, and rib injuries that wouldn't normally be enough to kill a person. Instead, the doctor thought that her death came from shock and heart failure. A railway official relates that Mrs. Sinico had often crossed the tracks late at night, and Mary Sinico said that her mother had started to drink at night, going out to buy alcohol. The article ends with the sentence: "No blame attached to anyone."

*Just as Duffy met Mrs. Sinico by chance at the opera, he reads about her death by chance in the newspaper. The details are given in a matter-of-fact, journalistic style that is distant and dispassionate, with testimony from various individuals who could shed some light on it. The doctor's statement about heart failure takes on a symbolic meaning: perhaps Mrs. Sinico died of a broken heart brought on by her split with Duffy that prompted her decline into alcohol abuse. The parallel of the titles—the article and short story are both called "A Painful Case"—suggests that while the newspaper gives the superficial, public account of Mrs. Sinico's death and finds that no one was to blame, there is in fact much more to the story.*



At first, Duffy reacts to the news of Mrs. Sinico's death with revulsion and moral condemnation. He is horrified by the thought that he confided his deepest thoughts and beliefs in her. He sees her and his associations with her as debased and shameful. He thinks of her unsavory drinking habit, which reminds him of drunkards in pubs. His thoughts are emphatic: "What an end!" "His soul's companion!" "But that she could have sunk so low!"

*The rest of the story shows Duffy's gradual reaction to the news of Mrs. Sinico's death. His first thoughts are very judgmental. True to form, Duffy imposes a strict moral framework on the news of Mrs. Sinico's descent. The language used to describe his thoughts is intense and condemnatory, which Joyce further emphasizes through his use of exclamation points.*



Duffy then pauses and reflects, feeling a nervous shock. He quickly leaves his **home** and goes to a pub, where he orders a drink. There is a small group of workmen also drinking there, but Duffy barely notices them. They leave, and he sits alone, ordering another drink. He continues reflecting on Mrs. Sinico's death. He questions whether or not he could have pursued a relationship with her. He asks himself if he were to blame. He realizes that she must have been very lonely after they parted and thinks to himself that his remaining days would be lonely as well. Duffy leaves the pub, going out into the chilly, overcast night to the park, entering it and walking under barren trees and through deserted alleys.

As Duffy walks in the park, he imagines that Mrs. Sinico is near him, even imagining hearing her voice and feeling the touch of her hand. He thinks to himself: "Why had he sentenced her to death?" These thoughts seem to destroy his certainty in his own morality. He walks up a hill and looks out over Dublin. He sees some people lying together, presumably having a sexual encounter. This sight disturbs him, and he feels that he has been "outcast" from the enjoyable aspects of life. He takes on blame for Mrs. Sinico's death, believing that he he doomed her to an embarrassing, shameful end. He sees a train come by and imagines the sound of its engine resounding Mrs. Sinico's name. As the train passes into the distance, Duffy begins to doubt his memories, and loses his connection with Mrs. Sinico. The night is utterly quiet and Duffy feels that he is alone.

*Duffy's feelings shift abruptly, so much so that he has to leave his home and go get a drink. He is in his head, not even noticing the other bar patrons, intensely reflecting on Mrs. Sinico's death. Despite the newspaper article's flat statement of no blame assigned to anyone, he begins to blame himself. He does so because he is developing some empathy for Mrs. Sinico, imagining how lonely she must have been after he ended their relationship. He applies this realization to himself, thinking of his future life to be lived alone and eventually forgotten. The bleak and somber setting of the city streets reflects Duffy's emotional state in the wake of these depressing insights.*



*Duffy walks to a city park, his imaginative connection to Mrs. Sinico growing to the point that she almost seems physically present to him. He takes on the blame for her death, feeling he "sentenced" her to it as if he were a judge imposing a criminal sentence. His once rigid and certain moral code shatters. Seeing people having a sexual liaison and then feeling "outcast" from life reinforces Duffy's ongoing sexual repression and seems to spark an epiphany within him. Duffy's sexual shame and panic led not only to Mrs. Sinico's tragic death, but to the death of any possibility of love and connection for him. He is so strongly connected in his mind to his former companion that he imagines her name in the sound of a train. However, as it rumbles away, he is left alone.*





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To cite this LitChart:

### MLA

Hennessee, David. "A Painful Case." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 15 Nov 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Hennessee, David. "A Painful Case." LitCharts LLC, November 15, 2019. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/a-painful-case>.

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### MLA

Joyce, James. *A Painful Case*. Penguin. 1993.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Joyce, James. *A Painful Case*. London: Penguin. 1993.