
Note: this paper was written by Chad Dickerson for Dr. Elgin Mellown's English class at Duke University in 1992.
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"A Prisoner for Life": Joyce's Portrayal of the Hopelessly
Bourgeois Artist in "A Little Cloud"

In "A Little Cloud," James Joyce offers a character sketch of the aspiring artist unable to overcome his limited bourgeois conceptions of what constitutes Poetry (capital 'p') and what ultimately denotes poetic success. Working as a clerk at the King's Inns in Dublin, Little Chandler traps himself into an existence of "refined" mediocrity: "When his hour had struck he stood up and took leave of his desk and his fellow-clerks punctiliously [emphasis mine]" (71). His notion of refinement is closely tied to the typical middle-class assumption that appearance and respectability are indistinguishable. "A neat modest figure" (71), Little Chandler unwittingly promotes an image of himself as just another unremarkable clerk among many; however, Little Chandler hopes to become a poet. In the moments just before he realizes the complete hopelessness of this aspiration, his thoughts revolve around his poetic vision and his hope for expressing his feelings in verse: "There were so many things he wanted to describe: his sensation of a few hours before on Grattan Bridge for example. If he could get back again into that mood. . ." (84). The pseudo-poetic state of reverie that Little Chandler longs to regain (73-74) illuminates the many obstacles he fails to recognize in his doomed artistic quest. In this section, Little Chandler's provincial conceptions of success and the monolithic institution of Poetry

reveal to the reader that Little Chandler is indeed "a prisoner for life" (84), or more correctly, a prisoner of his own bourgeois mentality.

Throughout the story, Little Chandler derives his own status from the status of others. Thus, on his way to meet the "successful" Gallaher, "[f]or the first time in his life he felt himself superior to the people he passed" (73). Like many middle-class snobs, Little Chandler gains a certain sense of satisfaction from simply being able to say (or think to himself) that he knows Gallaher. This association is a source of pride, a badge of civility he is able to wear that complements his "fair silken hair and moustache" (70). His knowledge of Gallaher's success on the London Press causes "his soul to revolt against the dull inelegance of Capel Street" (73). In this sentence, Joyce uses language that implicitly draws a connection between class ("inelegance") and place (Capel Street), a connection that penetrates Little Chandler's relationship to Gallaher and the London scene he represents.

In order to legitimately maintain an air of superiority, Little Chandler places the blame of his own class position upon the city in which he lives: "There was no doubt about it: if you wanted to succeed you had to go away. You could do nothing in Dublin" (73). The link between Dublin and creative paralysis reads as Little Chandler's defensive response not only to Gallaher's success, but to "the great city London where Gallaher lived" (70). The cleavage between Dublin and London in this passage is echoed in Little Chandler's assessment of Gallaher's motivations later in the story: "Gallaher was only patronising

him by his friendliness just as he was patronising Ireland by his visit" (80). Little Chandler assumes a defensive tone towards Gallaher's success, yet he refuses to acknowledge his own feelings of superiority based on his idea of himself as a poet. For Little Chandler, Poetry represents class mobility rather than aesthetic expression; it is his ticket to London and a life of ultimate respectability. With Poetry, Little Chandler believes he can succeed socially as well as materially; however, his preoccupations with class and the institution of Poetry in his "poetic" vision at Grattan Bridge actually preclude the possibility of his ever writing poetry--his ambition is much less artistic than it is social.

As Little Chandler passes over the bridge, he adopts a patronizing attitude towards the scene below, confounding a poetic vision with a vision of himself as a "London Poet" and cloaking his real class aspirations in the guise of pretentious poetic aspirations. The would-be poet is ostensibly offering his aesthetic appreciation of the scene, yet it reads as a statement of his own class superiority. He "pities" the houses he labels as "poor" and "stunted" (73), thinking to himself that they seem like a "band of tramps" (73). The pejorative words employed in this section (poor, stunted, tramps) show very little artistic objectivity and reveal the inability of Little Chandler to break from his personal obsession with class advancement. In Little Chandler's mind, the houses are like "old coats" of vagrants "covered with dust and soot." The metaphorical vagrants seem "stupefied by the panorama of the sunset" (73). As a poet, Little Chandler fails to transform

this physical manifestation of class disparity into anything aesthetically significant. Instead, he simply personifies the dilapidated, soot and dust-covered houses as indigent, soot and dust-covered people. The "poetic" image in his mind is a recycled version of the actual landscape, not a poetic re-creation of it, that explains little but the class consciousness of a failed poet.

As the passage continues, Little Chandler returns to his futile self-debate over what the Poet must be:

He wondered whether he could write a poem to express his idea. Perhaps Gallaher might be able to get it into some London paper for him. Could he write something original? He was not sure what idea he wished to express but the thought that a poetic moment had touched him took life within him like an infant hope. He stepped onward bravely. (73)

Although he muses on his ability to produce a poem, his most immediate concern seems not to write a poem or to simply be published, but to "get it into some London paper." His bourgeois needs can only be met by his inclusion in "some London paper"—any paper, so long as it provides the London stamp of legitimacy. For Little Chandler, London is the impersonal omniscient judge of Great Literature, the center of social success and respectability, and the home of the elite social circle he wishes to join. The beginning of the next paragraph affirms Little Chandler's exaltation of London life as opposed to his own: "Every step brought him nearer to London, farther from his sober inartistic life" (73). To be published in a London paper would give Little Chandler relief from his "sober inartistic life" and a powerful introduction into British

society; however, his concern over what "proper" Poetry is and how it is produced hinders his already arrested development.

Poetry (with a capital 'p') offers Little Chandler a possibility for social advancement, yet he worries about It in the same way newly upper-class people worry about proper table settings. Little Chandler does not necessarily hope to write Poetry as much as he wants to be a Poet and recognized as such. His overwhelming desire for the social position of a Great Poet becomes more important than the creative process and discipline involved in creating poetry. Little Chandler seems to have a limited knowledge of his own poetic impotence ("Could he write something original?"), yet he seems confident that he has been touched by a "poetic moment", the thought of which takes "life within him like an infant hope" (73). The thought of being touched by a "poetic moment" strikes Little Chandler more deeply than the poetic moment itself. Instead of offering a poetic vision that is completely his own creation, Little Chandler lets his own mystification of Poetry mediate between what he observes and what he hopes to create, frustrating any creative impulse before any writing takes place.

Trapped in his constrictive mentality and unwilling to take the very real risk of writing, Little Chandler feebly assures himself of his poetic intentions:

There were so many different moods and impressions that he wished to express in verse. He felt them within him. He tried to weigh his soul to see if it was a poet's soul. Melancholy was the dominant note of his temperament, he thought, but it was a melancholy tempered by recurrences of faith and resignation and simple joy.(73)

For all of Little Chandler's internal discussion of the subject, the fact that he has not written any poetry is absurd, yet true.

In fact, poetry in "A Little Cloud" is conspicuously absent (except Byron), yet its absence only sharpens the reader's perception of Little Chandler's predicament. At age thirty-two, Little Chandler is employed as one of many clerks in what is probably a highly structured work situation. His obligations to his wife and child bear down upon him heavily. Poetry offers Little Chandler a sort of religious crutch to lean upon so that he can tolerate the alienation he feels at home and at his job. When Little Chandler weighs his soul "to see if it was a poet's soul," he hopes to gain the personal redemption he is unable to find in everyday life. In the same way that people sometimes define God to their personal tastes, Little Chandler implicitly defines Poetry along the lines of his personal temperament (with obvious deference to Byron)--"melancholy tempered by recurrences of faith and resignation and simple joy" (73). Poetry offers the reassuring possibility of the expression of his hopelessness; without it, his life is doomed to voiceless tragedy.

His musings on his own melancholy soul notwithstanding, Little Chandler continues to think greedily of the praise and social benefits of being a successful poet. He does not hope to express himself in one poem or even a few poems, but "a book of poems" so "perhaps men would listen" (73). The "book of poems" would legitimize Little Chandler in the same way as an appearance "in some London paper." Both forms of media would assure a particular audience for his work, a small group of informed upper-class intellectuals. In yet another contradiction, Little Chandler hopes to exclude the masses of

which he is a part: "He would never be popular: he saw that. He could not sway the crowd but he might appeal to a little circle of kindred minds" (73-74). With these thoughts, Little Chandler proposes an identification with "kindred minds" as opposed to the "crowd," which he views with contempt. Asserting that he would never be "popular," Little Chandler depends on that word's connotations of tastelessness, vulgarity, and a lack of education, placing himself on a higher plane than the common public.

In the final moments of his pretentious daydream, Little Chandler revels in the imagined praise of the god-like "English critics," who would place him in "the Celtic school by reason of the melancholy tone of his poems" (74). With these thoughts, Little Chandler selfishly wishes for the attention of the critics and for the legitimacy and respectability of being associated with a "school" of established poetic work. Realizing that the melancholy tone of his work may not convince the critics of his wealth of knowledge, he resolves to "put in allusions" (74). Still unable to envision the verse he would write, Little Chandler nevertheless dreams of the praise he would receive, shaping the text of the notices to his satisfaction. In a final stab at class ascendancy, Little Chandler thinks about the many ways to fashion his rather plain name into a more sophisticated name worthy of his would-be status as Poet. Lamenting that his name was not more "Irish-looking," Little Chandler decides on "T. Malone Chandler" in yet another weak imaginary attempt at sophistication, a clearly bourgeois attempt at establishing recognition. Ultimately, he

decides to speak to Gallaher, the voice of London sophisticates, concerning the name change.

The scene at Grattan Bridge takes place rather early in the development of "A Little Cloud," but it suggests many of the issues that are important to the rest of the story: Little Chandler's relationship to Gallaher and London, Little Chandler's relationship to Dublin, and the interplay of these relationships during the reunion of the two men which culminates in Little Chandler's realization that he is "a prisoner for life." Throughout the story, Little Chandler's poetic aspirations are revealed as simple expressions of a desire to rise from the lowly middle-class status of a Dublin citizen to the high levels of the educated British in London. This bourgeois desire, along with resentment of the upper-classes, finds its expression in Little Chandler's thoughts during his meeting with Gallaher:

He felt acutely the contrast between his own life and his friend's, and it seemed unjust. Gallaher was his inferior in birth and education. He was sure that he could do something better than his friend had ever done, or could ever do, something higher than mere tawdry journalism if he only go the chance. (80)

This passage summarizes the problems Little Chandler encounters in his quest to be a Poet: he places Society over Poetry, "poetic moments" over actual verse, and social success over artistic integrity. Because of these compromises, ultimately "He couldn't do anything" (84).