# "To drink for luck": Drinking rituals and drinking games in Joyce

# "TO DRINK FOR LUCK": DRINKING RITUALS AND DRINKING GAMES IN JOYCE

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Nearly everywhere in Joyce's depictions of his fellow Dubliners it is possible to find two or more people described as having gathered together to enjoy alcoholic beverage consumption. The number of home and public house drinking scenes in Joyce is legion. Even in the quietest places, like the Flynns' drawing room where sips of sherry are taken at the priest's wake in "The Sisters," Joyce often shows the Irish going about their drinking in a ritualized or playful way. In A *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, a young Stephen sees the effects drink can have in loosening tongues at a Christmas holiday ritual, or in ceremonial braggadocio at his father's sad "reunion" with friends at a pub in Cork. Historically, the Irish are well known for their pub singing games, often in the form of rowdy drinking songs. And perhaps, hysterically, mind games and playful manipulation abound in all those "pub flies'" rituals when they are attempting to get free drinks.

Chronicling these rituals and games is, I believe, Joyce's way of showing how his literary works thrive on competition and conflict, so that the ritualistic drinking games depicted in his fiction, among other games, reflect this agonistic aspect of Irish life. Of course, writers of fiction, Joyce included, can and do *construct* and *play* games (that is, they can be either game wright or game player or both) within their fictions. However, in this particular instance, they may also be *viewers* of games, sports, and leisure activities, according to Bernard Suits ("Detective" 215). The cultural anthropological role of the author, as social observer and commentator, is a newer, but no less significant point of exploration for literary game theory. This is really modern criticism's recognition of the interdependence of fiction, play, and culture, which was first acknowledged by Jacques Ehrmann in his introductory article to the 1968 *Yale French Studies* special issue on literature and play. However, even a young James Joyce, while

lecturing to a Triestine audience in 1907 on his native Ireland's history, language, and culture, understood his social anthropological role by describing himself as one of the "dilettante sociologists" who 'look and peer into the human animal" ("Ireland" 173). I think Joyce was underestimating his amateur, desultory role as a chronicler of Irish culture, either fictionally or non-fictionally. Therefore, this paper is my attempt at a recognition of the cultural and historical interconnection between social and private drinking, game playing, and the myths and rituals related to both in Joyce's fiction.

Oddly, there has been little scholarly investigation into this ceremonial phenomenon in Joyce, a bit surprising since so much alcohol is imbibed in the pages of the Joyce canon. Only Zack Bowen, who has recently explored the relationship between music and ritual in *Ulysses* in a chapter from his *Bloom's Old Sweet Song*, makes an extended reference to drinking rituals in that text. And John Bishop, in his masterful study of *Finnegans Wake*, speaks extensively about the importance of Earwicker's pub as locus for the dream-book, as well as the somnolent symbolism of alcoholic beverage consumption in the *Wake* and some of the games played in the pub(s) (135-140).[1] However, my study extends not only to a greater number of Joyce's fictions, it also multiplies by several fold the kinds of drinking rituals and games performed in those works as well as the number of ways of explaining these customs. Cultural anthropologists and historians have long noted the rituals and games surrounding humans', especially males', intake of alcoholic drinks. From the social function of beer drinking among African Bantu tribe members to the behavior of cane alcohol-intoxicated Bolivian Indians to the sometimes bizarre behavior of members of the American temperance movement in the last century, anthropologists have long attempted to note, analyze, and put drinking customs and rituals into a cross-cultural perspective. Economics, sociology, psychology, law, and both traditional and folk medicine are all among the disciplines that either interact in or react to the creation of alcoholic imbibing behaviors among any group or race of people.

James Joyce maps out many of these customs and rituals in the pages of his books. Not all the games and ritualized behaviors he

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[1] Mark Osteen's recent study, *The Economy of "Ulysses"* deals with the socio-economic consequences of drinking and alcoholism in Joyce's Dublin. However, his extraordinarily extensive text is not concerned with the games and rituals surrounding drinking. Still, Professor Osteen corroborates my own observation concerning the ubiquity of drinking in Joyce: ". . . more money and time is spent drinking in *Ulysses* than other activity, except perhaps playing the horses" (169).

notes are fun or even normal. Some are self-destructive pretending and deceiving games as in the case of Farrington in the short story, "Counterparts." Farrington is a perfect example of a dysfunctional type of personality engaging, while intoxicated, in deceptive games with the people around him in order to cope with his feelings of oppression. In Farrington's case, the feelings are probably economically based due to excessive personal expenditure on alcohol, and socially based due to his bullying wife when he is sober. Whether for criminal or purely innocent reasons, personalities like his hide behind the mask of intoxication, usually because they feel they can "get away with" something.[2] The "false faces" are only in the imaginations of these dissemblers, but like masquerade participants in an eighteenth-century romance novel, the deceitful personality becomes incognito and therefore not culpable for any indiscretions incurred during the pretext. "The pleasure lies in being or passing for another," according to Roger Caillois's definition of *mimicry*. Caillois continues:

> At a carnival, the masquerader does not try to make one believe that he is really a marquis, toreador, or Indian, but rather tries to inspire fear and take advantage of the surrounding license, a result of the fact that the mask disguises the conventional self and liberates the true personality. (21)

In Farrington's case, his mask is like an easily discernible palimpsest; his dipsomaniacal pretense reveals a pent-up, angry personality that can only find release in the abuse of his son Tom.

Before that, however, Farrington plays several ritualized and actual games in this story. The most obvious ritualized one is the "bathroom-snug room" subterfuge which he tries to pull, I think quite often, on his immediate supervisor, Shelley. The ritual works like this: by leaving behind his cap on the hat rack, thus implying that he is merely headed for the lavatory, he is then able to sneak out to the nearby snug (a small room in the back of a store or pub) for yet another pint of porter during work hours. However, Mr. Shelley can see through Farrington's ruse, which is doubled upon Farrington's return; he has to pretend that he is unable to answer as to his "secret" whereabouts because it is too delicate to mention in front of clients. Shelley responds: "—I know that game, he said. Five times in one day is a little

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[2] According to Caillois, "acts of mimicry tend to cross the border between childhood and adulthood" (21). He cautions, though, that conscious deceivers (e.g. spies and fugitives) may be masked or disguised but they are not *playing*. For me, none of the adults in *Dubliners* are consciously deceitful (although John Corley of "Two Gallants" comes very close); they are more symptoms than causes of the disorder, and hence still in the realm of play.

bit ..." (*Dubliners* 89). Farrington pretends to be a good worker, but his schizoid other half, the heavy drinker, tries to deceive everyone, including his co-workers, friends, and family. Perhaps, the narrator also engenders in us a sense of Farrington's split personality by switching back and forth at specific times in the story between references to the very generic "man" and the more specific "Farrington."

At one point in the narrative when he is called "Farrington," he plays an actual drinking game when he is called upon to "uphold the national honour" in a "trial of strength" against the Englishman Weathers in Mulligan's pub. Their agonistic battle involves no weapons except the physical prowess and stamina exhibited in the forearms of the two combatants. But the most important difference is that Farrington is a pretender in this title bout for arm-wrestling champion. Once reputed to be a "strong man" owing to his height and "great bulk," Farrington is an alcoholic who has probably gone to flab. In his intoxicated state at the pub, he fools himself into thinking he is still a superior player, capable of defeating "a mere boy," the hated Englishman. Joyce describes the drinking game in great detail, using it as the finale to this section of the narrative on Farrington's highly anticipated night of drinking with his buddies as the nadir of Farrington's increasingly foul mood. The apparent entertainment value the game provides the crowd of spectators in Mulligan's pub is offset by Farrington's vicious retort to the bartending curate who admires Weathers' "knack," whereby Farrington barks back, "What the hell do you know about it' ... What do you put your gab in for?" (*Dubliners* 96). The only thing that appeases Farrington at this point is another round of drinks bought by the peace-making O'Halloran: "Pony up, boys. We'll have just one little smahan more and then we'll be off!" (*Dubliners* 96).

The buying and drinking of rounds of drinks is the most consistently noted sort of alcohol-related ritual described by Joyce in much of his fiction. This custom is common to many Western cultural groups, but the Irish are often funnier and more ritualistic about it. This is not to say that the drinking of a round can't have a deceptive role as well. Take for instance the case of Jimmy Doyle in the story, "After the Race." Jimmy has wined, dined, and made merry with his newfound friends from "England, France, Hungary, and the United States of America" (*Dubliners* 48), but on the yacht these "devils of fellows" trick a highly intoxicated Jimmy into a "terrible game" of cards. Towards the end of it, they stop for one last round of drinks "for luck," but even a less than astute Jimmy Doyle knows that his luck is nonexistent at this point and that that round of drinks has just put the

nightcap on a good portion of his inheritance.

In his essay "Attitudes Toward Drinking in the Irish Culture," Robert F. Bales helps explain the Irish male's sense of "security and solidarity" which is "manifested and strengthened by the ubiquitous practice of 'treating'" (171). To stand a man a drink, or to buy a round, demonstrates both a symbolic sense of equality as well as an essential aspect of Irish hospitality. In a 1911 historical tome, M.J.F. McCarthy metaphorically describes "the habit of 'treating'" as a

> social law in Catholic Ireland enforced with all the vigour of a Coercion Act ..., a [man's] duty to "stand," that is to invite [his friends] to drink and pay for all they take. Then, when the drinks are consumed, another member of the company is expected to "stand," and invariably does so. ... It is a deadly insult to refuse to take a drink from a man, unless an elaborate explanation and apology be given and accepted. (308-309)

Characters in *Dubliners* like Little Chandler, Ignatius Galagher, Jimmy Doyle, Tom Kernan, Freddy Malins, and even Farrington, seem at least temporarily fiscally capable of standing rounds in their respective drinking situations. And none of them, not even Little Chandler, is too small minded or insulting to refuse a round of drinks. However, others, like Lenehan, who has been waiting all night for Corley to finish with the slavey, just so he can cadge a few free drinks, are not in good enough economic straits at the moment to be able to buy others drinks. So they develop elaborate rituals to connive others into treating them without having to return the favor.

One of the best exponents of this ritualized game in all of Joyce's fiction is the barfly, the hilarious and acerbic narrator of the Cyclops episode of *Ulysses*. It's not too surprising that the barfly would object to the St. Patrick's Anti-Treating League, first mentioned by Leopold Bloom, of whom the narrator secretly thinks: "Antitreating is about the size of it. Gob, he'd let you pour all manner of drink down his throat till the Lord would call him before you'd ever see the froth of his pint" (*Ulysses* 12.684-686). In 1902, such a league was established "to promote temperance by combating the institution of 'treating' ... thus prolonging drinking bouts beyond sobriety" (Gifford and Seidman 337). The barfly's rant at Bloom's not standing drinks is superbly and ironically undercut for us readers since we know the narrator is certainly not buying any drinks either, nor for that matter is the citizen. Joe Hynes is the one standing most of the drinks for these fellows in Barney Kiernan's pub. Still the citizen and the barfly both know there is a formulaic ritual necessary before the treater will stand the first round. Zack Bowen believes that the barfly is miffed with both Joe and the citizen because Joe is "not sticking to the ritual rules: drinks

first, conversation later" (120). But I disagree; I think this is the usual order of this comic ritual. The barfly seems only amusingly annoyed at the talk of economics and politics, perhaps even seeing Joe as a superior player of this one-upping conversational word game: "But, begob, Joe was equal to the occasion" (*Ulysses* 12.134-35). Aloud to Joe, he asks him to stop 'codding' or joking so that they can move on the next portion of the game—the ritualized ordering of the drinks:

> —Give it a name, citizen, says Joe.
> —Wine of the country, says he.
> —What's yours? says Joe.
> —Ditto MacAnaspey, says I. (*Ulysses* 12.143-46)

As soon as Joe Hynes orders the three pints of porter from Terry the curate, he continues the game with a volley to the citizen: "And how's the old heart, citizen?" thus allowing the alcohol-conversation mix to continue through at least two more treatings by Joe over the course of the hour.

Perhaps as well the barfly is anxious to get on to the actual treating stage itself because either his throat is too dry (as he maintains), or because one of the practical reasons behind such drinking rituals in a pub is that alcohol ingestion triggers the "loosened tongue" in certain patrons, or, more politely, it acts as a conversation starter. This aspect of pubbing is just one more way Leopold Bloom bucks the system. He not only refuses a drink offered by Joe, accepting only a cigar, he still manages to "do the rapparee" with a number of the pub-goers, but especially the citizen: his comments and retorts to the citizen will set in gear the final Homeric reenactment of this episode. Bloom is no teetotaler, though. He has had a burgundy at Davy Byrnes's "moral pub" and a hard cider after dinner at the Ormond Hotel. But he pays his owns way and doesn't often treat, thus further alienating him as a non-Irishman in the eyes of the barfly and the citizen.

The reason Joe Hynes and J.J. O'Molloy are treating is that they have either managed to borrow money or to get an advance on sales. Stephen Dedalus, the other big stander of drinks this day, isn't exactly rich either, since he owes lots of money to people all over Dublin. But he will blow most his two-weeks' salary on this day on treats and whore-mongering at Bella Cohen's brothel. Bloom isn't rich either, but, as the "Ithaca" episode shows, he and Molly are better off financially than many Dubliners. Of course, his problem of not knowing or understanding the treating ritual is compounded by the fact that a rumor has mistakenly made Bloom the twenty-to-one winner in the Ascot Gold Cup horse race with his inside tip on

Throwaway. One post-game ritual any good gambler who "hits the Big One" must be aware of is the buying of multiple, or even all, rounds of drinks for his friends and acquaintances. On Bloom's return from the courthouse near the end of Cyclops, the now quite intoxicated narrator thinks angrily:

> Courthouse my eye and your pockets hanging down with gold and silver. Mean bloody scut. Stand us a drink itself. Devil a sweet fear! There's a jew for you! All for number one. Cute as a shithouse rat. Hundred to five. (*Ulysses* 12.1759-61)

Of course Joyce underscores the ritualistic nature of all these pub games, whether they are mind games or the "usual customs." He does this underscoring with the thirty-three parodic insertions into the barfly's narrative. Many of these play on the sacred and mythological aspects of Catholic Ireland. I agree with Zack Bowen that Joyce's creation of the character of Bloom is an even more effective way to debunk certain strong Irish Catholic motifs and legends, and that "Joyce uses Bloom as the agent of desacralization ... to explode the mythologies and rituals of Joyce's fellow countrymen" (123).

However, drinking rituals can be either secular or sacred in nature. Most are the former, but one last instance where the lines are blurred is at a funeral and its predecessor, the wake for the deceased. Joyce's whole last great novel *Finnegans Wake* takes off on that theme, but not much is mentioned there about drinking the health of the living after the funeral ceremony is completed. Joyce describes that ritual in both *Ulysses* and *Stephen Hero*, but reserves the longest description for the unfinished first novel. Remember that in the maturer work, in the "Hades" episode specifically, Bloom mentions the custom of the men stopping for a drink after the burial rites are over. When the hearse and funeral carriage that he and the others are driving in passes Dunphy's corner on the way to Glasnevin cemetery, Bloom thinks:

> Dunphy's corner. Mourning coaches drawn up, drowning their grief. A pause by the wayside. Tiptop position for a pub. Expect we'll pull up here on the way back to drink his health. Pass round the consolation. Elixir of life. (*Ulysses* 6.428-431)

Economically-minded Bloom sees the advantage of having a pub situated by a cemetery, but he can also spiritually justify these men's ritualistic drinking *usquebaugh* or the water of life for consolation upon the death of a friend.

However, in *Stephen Hero*, a more autobiographical Joyce describes that same ritual of stopping at Dunphy's but he may be adding Stephen's own rite of passage whereby Stephen orders his first

drink in a public house. In context, the sad occasion is his sister Isabel's funeral; her wake had been a two-night affair where a "big company assembled in the drawingroom," and the narrator adds "they did not smoke but they drank and told stories. The morning after the table looked like a marine-store, so crowded was it with empty bottles, blue and green" (*Stephen Hero* 170). After the funeral, the carriages all stop at Dunphy's, where Mr. Wilkinson, who is sort of subletting his rented house to the large Daedalus[3] family, stands the first round of drinks, a typical ceremonial gesture we'll obviously see a lot more of in Joyce's completed fictions. Wilkinson even stands the carriage drivers a pint of porter each, but the funeral party is drinking special whiskeys. Stephen too orders a pint to the noticeable disgust of Mr. Daedalus: "While his head was beneath the tankard he was conscious of his startled father and he felt the savour of the bitter clay of the graveyard sharp in his throat" (*Stephen Hero* 173). Some readers may be surprised later in the narrative to find that Simon is startled in Dunphy's not by his son's ordering a drink, but by what he has ordered exactly. He assails his son with:

> Didn't I see you the morning of your poor sister's funeral—don't forget that? Unnatural bloody ruffian. By Christ I was ashamed of you that morning. You couldn't behave like a gentleman or talk or do a bloody thing only slink over in a corner with the hearse-drivers by God. Who taught you to drink pints of plain porter, might I ask? Is that considered a proper thing for an ... a artist to do? (*Stephen Hero* 234)

If this was the occasion for a teenaged Stephen Daedalus's first public drink, it is interesting to note that the Irish father sees nothing wrong with it, at least not as the canvassers in "Ivy Day" pretentiously do of the seventeen-year-old delivery boy's accepting a bottle of stout in the committee room:

> —That's the way it begins, said the old man.
> —The thin edge of the wedge, said Mr Henchy. (*Dubliners* 129)

Rather, Simon Daedalus, once a respectable landowner, but now "a drinker . . . and . . . a praiser of his own past" as Stephen describes him to Cranly in *Portrait* (241), is still putting on ritualistic airs in front of his friends by drinking expensive whiskey (at Wilkinson's expense of course), and he expects his son to do the same.

In overview, Joyce's literary game in showing so much leisurely, non-productive drinking activity in his fictions is to give the texts what Peter Hutchinson calls "a parallel, or series of parallels, which will

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[3] I am using here the original spelling of Stephen's surname as Joyce spelled it in the manuscript of *Stephen Hero*.

illuminate a strand" (23). As a game with the reader, this leisure parallel acts as a mirror or "interior duplication" (28). Joyce asks us to watch the Empire's Second City's turn-of-the-century "hemiplegia"[4] being reflected off its inhabitants' carefree customs and drinking rituals. However, Hutchinson argues that this doubling can act as a warning sign for action in the narrative that could develop (28). Joyce might be warning his contemporary Dubliners (and us as well) that a love of pleasure-seeking alone can unfortunately define a culture better than any other barometer. And unlike many of the other games played in *Dubliners*, *Stephen Hero*, *Portrait*, and *Ulysses* which may not be found in all parts of the world, leisure and the pursuit of it are transcultural, perhaps universal. The leisurely pursuit of drinking and its resultant games and rituals, after all, fits neatly into all four of Roger Caillois's game categories by which he explains the reason why we play: "The taste for competition, the pursuit of chance, the pleasure of simulation, and the attraction of vertigo ..." (85).

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[4] As another type of mirroring, hemiplegia may reflect the two-way view of Dublin I am suggesting Joyce gives us. Hemiplegia is a type of paralysis, a symptom of Dublin's life that Joyce describes throughout the short stories. However, etymologically, the word means "stricken" in "half," that is, paralyzed on one side of the body. Hence only half the body of Dublin is frozen or static; the other half still functions normally. The body is, in effect, a distorted mirror image of itself.

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