

ANALYSIS

“Clay” (1914)



James Joyce (Irish)

(1882-1941)

“Clay” from *Dubliners* is typical of Joyce the Modernist, whose perspective in the story is suggested by the physiognomy of that elusive corkscrew. Everything depends upon the reader being more perceptive than Joe Donnelly, for almost every detail of the story implies opposites or contradictions, the essence of irony. Reading on all levels simultaneously is somewhat like playing three-dimensional chess.

Maria the central figure is a soul of clay, one of many old maids in *Dubliners*, isolated between the Flynn sisters and the Morkan sisters. Her spinsterhood invokes the most obvious and for her the most painful ironies: “Lizzie Fleming said Maria was sure to get the ring.” Maria pretends “she didn’t want any ring or any man either,” and laughs with “disappointed shyness.” The stylish bakery clerk “asked her was it a wedding cake she wanted to buy,” and Maria pretends amusement, blushing. In the saucer game Joyce emphasizes symbolic appropriateness rather than irony by having Maria miss the ring and get the clay (death). But her response is the most crucial irony in the story, at least as far as she personally is concerned: “Maria understood that it was wrong that time.” All present are relieved to see her get the prayer-book the next time; for them the appropriate choice is the abhorrent choice. “Soon they were all quite merry again and Mrs. Donnelly said Maria would enter a convent before the year was out because she had got the prayer-book.”

Joe asks the old lady to sing “some little song before she went.” In her embarrassment Maria seems to sense some of the irony of her romantic song from *The Bohemian Girl* and it may be this partial consciousness which causes her to omit a stanza about a lover. “Blushing very much,” she sings in a “tiny quavering voice” that she dreamt she “dwelt in marble halls” instead of dirty Dublin, with vassals and serfs instead of squabbling laundresses; that she, a withering spinster, “was the hope and pride” of all assembled; that she had wealth, nobility and love.

The irony of the song expands through Maria’s analogical association with the Irish Catholic Church. It may be tempting to think of Maria as also analogous to Ireland itself, but this second grand association is

dubious and would confuse such otherwise precise social ironies in the story as those implied in the song. There is a point of diminishing return, even in Joyce. As to Maria's identification with the Church, however, there can be little confusion and no doubt.

The last words of the story "Counterparts" lead directly into "Clay" when Farrington's boy invokes Maria's namesake to avert a beating. The last futile cries of "I'll say a Hail Mary" are followed by the introduction of the futile Maria in "Clay," as Joyce answers exhortation with deflation. The virginal Maria is treated by her relatives like the Virgin Mary, and she unwittingly enacts an imperfect allegorical parody of the Church. "Everyone was so fond of Maria." Joe calls her his "proper mother." Her duty is to cleanse the soiled laundry of Irish souls, and she superintends a mock sacrament in the *Dublin by Lamplight* laundry, ringing the big bell as a summons, distributing bread to the complacent, joking communicants. Yet literally she works for Protestants, who "control Ireland's purse." Her own purse is a present from Protestant Belfast. "She had become accustomed to the life," but "there was no time like the long ago," when Ireland, old and young alike, was totally Catholic.

Standing on the tram wearing her Dublin-brown waterproof, she is ignored by the young men. But an old gentleman moves over so that she can take her "proper" place. He is all Irish, with a square red face and a Dublin-brown hat. He is stout and, most typically, under the influence of stout. Maria the "proper mother" favors him "with demure nods and hems," while Maria the spinster is so flustered she loses her plumcake. Like the Church, she is so preoccupied with form, she loses the gift and fails to deliver. Maria also ultimately fails as a peacemaker: "Joe cried that God might strike him stone dead if ever he spoke a word to his brother again and Maria said she was sorry she had mentioned the matter." The Irish Church was of course the antithesis of a peacemaker in the times of Charles Parnell. For her blind groping the "proper mother" gets death and prayer, then sings of being "the hope and the pride."

Since Maria is like a witch as well as a saint, the two sets of associations contradict each other. She has "a very long nose and a very long chin," and when she laughs their tips nearly meet. Her evening out is Halloween, the night before All Saints' Day, the night when people pretend to be what they are not. She is the victim of her own spell. Maria the spinster is doomed, at least in part, by Maria the "proper mother." For her "tidy little" mind is the product and embodiment of Irish Catholicism. She is disappointed in her life, but uncritical of her faith. She has never really examined either one, anymore than she really examines herself in the mirror, when she appropriately looks at the body and not the head of her constitution: "In spite of its years she found it a nice tidy little body." Her body, like her mind, is "diminutive," arrested in its development, now shrinking with age. She sees what she wants to see and pretense is her defense. "The cook said you could see yourself in the big copper boilers," but such reflections are distortions.

Maria never really sees herself at all. In addition to being both saintlike and witchlike she is both ladylike and ratlike. Like a rat she is "very, very small," long-nosed, brown-coated, "ferreting her way"--and trapped. Like a lady she considers the laundry matron "a nice person to deal with" because she is "so genteel." Ginger Mooney on the other hand "had the notions of a common woman."

Though Maria has no epiphany, some critics claim one for Joe. But he is a counterpart in circumstances and sensibility to Farrington of "Counterparts." He also laughs too much over "a smart answer which he had made" to his boss. Fond of stout, bitter towards brothers, sick with loss, both men end blinded by emotion, without any genuine revelation. Joe's "eyes filled up so much with tears that he could not find what he was looking for and in the end he had to ask his wife to tell him where the corkscrew was." Tears of sentimentality and remorse blur his vision in the fullest sense. He has begged for "one of the old songs," one that would remind him of "the long ago." And he is "very much moved" by the song rather than by the pathos of Maria's omitted stanza, which he, like the others, regards as a simple mistake.

The missing corkscrew, one of several lost objects in the story, embodies the final irony. The only meaningful epiphany in "Clay" is the reader's. As with the "Pok!" epiphanies of "Ivy Day in the Committee Room," the revelation depends upon a missing opener, and consists in what certain Dubliners cannot discover, cannot see.

Michael Hollister (2015)