

# Deconstructing the old style of writing in "a mother"



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James Joyce's *A Mother* is a short story based around the life of Mrs. Kearney, a strong-willed woman whose breach of convention results in the destruction of her acclaimed reputation. Joyce's linguistic use of naturalism, modernism, and feminism, exemplifies the "paralysis"[1] of Dublin's rigid societal conventions. It further reiterates the gender divisions that existed. The abstract use of language offers the reader different interpretations of the story without disclosing Joyce's intended meaning. However, it also adds a layer of complexity for readers when analyzing simple interactions between characters, or trying to understand the characters themselves. Despite this, it is clear that Joyce's use of the above linguistic styles are effective in making makes the reader's interpretation of the story, their own.

Joyce's use of modernist techniques means that the language used is never absolute. He aims to deconstruct previous styles of writing, by manipulating the normal narrative structures of stories. This means that the reader is prevented from making an immediate judgment of Mrs. Kearney until after the story's end. For example, Mrs. Kearney is described initially as a "Lady" - a title that evokes respect and good breeding. Through this title she is free from the restraints cast upon other women, and indulges in privileges like organizing the talent show. Yet, in gaining these privileges, it appears that Mrs. Kearney had to succumb to the patriarchal society of the time, by marrying. Joyce describes this action as "silenc[ing] them [society] by marrying". The use of such language makes it difficult for the reader to ascertain whether Mrs. Kearney is repressed in her identity as a woman, or whether she has gained greater freedom in society through marriage.

In helping the reader reach a balanced judgment of Mrs. Kearney, Joyce provides the reader with various examples for each of the above roles. In some ways Mrs. Kearney has become trapped in her role as “ A Mother” – she can no longer fulfill her dreams and must live vicariously through her daughter. In other ways, one could perhaps infer that she has been liberated, as she is able to take on a more active role in society whilst commanding the respect of the Committee (initially). This contrasts with the character Polly in *The Boarding House*, who is assigned one identity only – a mere sexual object – by her mother and Mr. Doran, because she is a woman. Unlike Mrs. Kearney, Polly does not have an option of “ rights” and thus submits herself to societal conventions. However, Joyce shows Mrs. Kearney as obsessed with “ asking for [her] rights,” such that her passive-aggressive behavior eventually leads to her downfall.

Indeed, her unbending nature and desire to win even small triumphs can be seen when she desperately orders Mr. Holohan “ I’m not done with you yet”. However, her attempt to break free from the chains of female repression leads to her portrayal as someone without “ decency”. This is similar to the story *Clay*, where the character, Maria, disregards reality in favor of appreciating the small (but meaningful) aspects of life. As such, what Joyce portrays, is a woman who is unaware of just how limited her rights are as a woman. Although Mrs Kearney demands rights because she is a “ Lady”, she is ultimately trapped in the sexist social order existing in Dublin for centuries. It is this contradictory view of Mrs Kearney as both aggressive and vulnerable that makes it difficult for the reader to view her in one light.

Furthermore, Joyce's naturalistic writing style prevents the reader from providing conventional responses to Mrs. Kearney's character and situation. He adds a complexity to her character – she is neither good nor bad, nor feminine nor masculine; and yet she harbors traits familiar to all these concepts. What Joyce intends to do is create an authentic image of humans; they are complicated beings who can hold various identities at any one time. This means that all humans, like Mrs. Kearney, can exist in a state of paralysis. Moreover, the use of free indirect discourse allows the reader to explore various thoughts/feelings presented by the characters, and this is a cunning manipulation of normal narrative structures. It is through this that the reader is able to view Mrs. Kearney as both vulnerable and obstinate, as they are able to appreciate how her insecurities and zeal for power could possibly have arisen from her unfortunate situation of being a woman.

Further examples of Mrs. Kearney's inherent contradictions are demonstrated when she admits that she would be treated better “ if she had been a man”; this follows a perverse logic of feminism. Such a fight for independence is not truly independent, for Mrs. Kearney wishes to attain equality without raising a woman's worth in society. To this end, the reader sees Mrs. Kearney assuming a more masculine role when ordering her husband, “ Get a cab!” – this is a shocking power play for a woman in the nineteenth century. Moreover, Mrs. Kearney pressures her daughter Kathleen into fulfilling her own lost dreams. By doing so, she represses another female, just like the male-dominated Committee represses her. Certainly, Joyce makes this clear by only representing Kathleen's voice in the story, once. Kathleen's situation is similar to the stories Eveline and The

Boarding House, where both Eveline and Polly try to break free from the fate of their mothers; ultimately they are overwhelmed by parental pressure.

However, because of the stagnant societal conventions and Mrs. Kearney's own quashed dreams, the reader is able to appreciate that her character's power struggle primarily stems from her own disillusionment with society.

Ultimately, Mrs. Kearney's character has been left for debate amongst Joyce's readers, but one can infer that she essentially represents everything that she despises. She holds contradicting traits because she is a product of unfair treatment based on her gender. It is clear that Joyce's use of different styles of language is deliberately and effectively ambiguous, so as to allow the reader to draw their own conclusions. The simplicity of his language and manipulation of narrative techniques by using free indirect discourse creates an observational and objective tone, so that the narrative does not restrict what is being conveyed to the reader. However, this naturalistic and modernist style contributes to a sense of ambiguity and passiveness, such that the reader is never fully confident of their judgments.

Referencing:

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