

# "the little cloud" from a feminist perspective



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BUSTER**

Dubliners was published in 1914 and written by James Joyce, who was born in 1882. When applying feminist theory to the Dubliners short stories, one must keep in mind that although feminism had its start in the 19th century, many of the formative feminist essays were written after James Joyce had died. Joyce likely had no intention of his short stories being analyzed through a feminist lens and one should also consider that it is equally likely that women were not Joyce's primary audience. Understanding this, does not detract from a feminist reading of one of James Joyce's stories. In fact, this understanding gives the reader even more to analyze, as it contextualizes one representation of how men understood women in the absence of women present during the time period in which Dubliners was written. "A Little Cloud," was included in the collection of short stories and featured only one woman in a speaking role in its entirety. The character in question was Little Chandler's wife, Annie, who appeared only at the very end of the short story. However, during their conversation in the middle of the short story, Little Chandler and Gallaher talk about women, and reveal during this conversation, their thoughts about women and their expectations of them. Despite the near absence of women in "The Little Cloud," the short story remains intriguing and complex for a multitude of reasons, representing the contrasting ideals of men and how misogyny manifests because of these ideals.

"A Little Cloud" begins with Little Chandler reminiscing about his friend, Ignatius Gallaher, who has left Dublin and has found success elsewhere. They plan to meet and initially, Little Chandler is excited and ecstatic for his friend and his prosperity. At first, Little Chandler wants to live vicariously

through Gallaher and presses him about what life is like outside of Dublin. Their conversation soon turns to what the women are like in the places Gallaher has visited, who then makes the claim that “ there’s no woman like the Parisienne – for style, for go” (Joyce 72). It is never made clear exactly what go means, but one can only assume it is a colloquialism for a woman who is promiscuous or otherwise unscrupulous by the standards of the early 20th century as Little Chandler immediately insists that if the women of Paris go, then the city is an “ immoral city ... compared with London or Dublin” (72). An immediate double standard arises as although Little Chandler expresses distaste for Gallaher’s lifestyle, he does not indicate that he believes Gallaher to be immoral, even though it is understood that for Gallaher to know that Parisienne women are promiscuous, he would then, by proxy, also be promiscuous. However, Little Chandler does not state that Gallaher is immoral, and in fact, earlier, states that although he finds Gallaher to be vulgar, Little Chandler is also envious of Gallaher’s life. This fuels the conflict within Little Chandler’s mind – he is at once both repulsed and enticed by exotic or promiscuous women which is but one cause for his later resentment against his life, his wife, and his infant son.

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir described the concept of the Eternal Feminine, a standard by which all women are judged yet none may achieve because it is impossible to do so. The Eternal Feminine consists of too many contradictory ideas for any one person to achieve them all and in judging women by this standard, de Beauvoir believed that it denies real women the right to live as they are and forces them to live as failures, because the idea of the Eternal Feminine is never wrong and is “ never considered a false

entity" (41). Instead, it is women who simply fail to live up to the standards that have been imposed on them by men. In "The Little Cloud" the conflict that Little Chandler faces is somewhat similar. At one point in the conversation with Gallaher, the man inquires about Little Chandler's marriage, to which he blushes and smiles, revealing that "[he] was married last May twelve months" (Joyce 74). At this point in the story, Little Chandler is content with his marriage, his wife, and the life he leads. This indicates that although later in the story Little Chandler resents his wife, Annie's, mannerisms it would make sense to infer that at one point, Little Chandler, in the very least, tolerated her primness. This only begins to change when Little Chandler gets the feeling that Gallaher is patronizing him and he wishes "to vindicate himself in some way, to assert his manhood" (76). This vindication manifests in a misogynistic way. He begins to lust after 'exotic' women, finding them exciting solely for this 'exotic' nature. Much like how the Eternal Feminine is a standard that can never be met, Little Chandler's standards are similar. He must have, at one point, been pulled to Annie for some reason to marry and begin a family with her, so his preference in women changes from a woman like Annie, who is white, prim, and proper to the woman in his fantasies, Jewish, exotic, and rich. It is equally likely that if Little Chandler had married a Jewish woman, he would have also found her lacking at the end of "The Little Cloud" because she would not have been a woman like Annie: white, prim, and proper. He wanted a woman like Annie and married her, but is later disgruntled by her lack of passion and his standards cannot be met:

Furthermore, Little Chandler's idea of a perfect woman harms his relationship with his wife and with his infant son, as he allows his conception of the ideal woman to cause resentment to build within him as he finds his wife not meeting his standards. Little Chandler's resentment builds when he thinks that he is stuck in a marriage that has stagnated him, but more than that, married to a woman that is not exotic. He racializes a Jewish woman's features, specifically her eyes, and begins to lust for those features in particular. By creating the image of perfect Jewish woman based solely on racialized features, Little Chandler sets himself up for disappointment when women in the real world do not conform and look exactly like the image he has created in his head. Much like the Eternal Feminine and the concept of perfect femininity can only harm women when they do not achieve it, lusting after and idealizing women of color based on stereotypes and racialized features can only fail the women in question when they look or act differently than what has been assumed of them. One can only infer that if Little Chandler met a Jewish woman and she was demure or her features were not what he was envisioning, he would also be resentful of her, just as he is of Annie. Little Chandler's standards, like the Eternal Feminine, are impossible to meet and cause harm in the real world as he tries to navigate it based on what he wants, especially when those wants are impossible and unrealistic for one woman to meet.

In the end, although Little Chandler's resentment of his life is not caused solely because of his misogyny, it does manifest in misogynistic ways. By blaming his wife for being passionless and cold, he absolves himself of any possible failure and shoulders the full responsibility of his lack of success in

life on others. Much like how it is never the Eternal Feminine that is wrong, Little Chandler is unsuccessful not because of his own failure, but instead partially because of his wife.

## **Works Cited**

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