

Deep dive in symbolism of "a mother"



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The thirteenth of fifteen stories in James Joyce's *Dubliners* collection, "A Mother," can be seen as something of a break between the heavy, serious vignettes in its vicinity. It can be seen as a story to chuckle at; after all, the title character is an overbearing "stage mother" who demands that her daughter be paid full price for performing in a series of concerts in which she accompanies on the piano. Everyone, including eventually her family, feels that she is not only overreacting but ruining the show for everyone. It is possible to read this story and conclude that it's simply a case of a shrill, uptight woman trying to live vicariously through her child. Upon a closer reading of "A Mother," however, it is evident that there is more than meets the eye. Joyce includes intricately placed symbols and metaphors alluding to Irish tradition, and references Irish history quite a few times. In the following essay I will make a case that Joyce constructs a social commentary within "A Mother," calling for a progressive mindset in Ireland. To do this, Joyce discusses three main themes: death, Irish nationalism, and feminism.

First, death is symbolically portrayed throughout the narrative, with Mrs. Kearney symbolizing life. This argument demands more than a surface-level reading of her character. As far as Mrs. Kearney's marriage goes, Joyce writes that she had married "out of spite" (91) and jumped at the chance to wed her husband to silence the gossip of her friends. Her marriage is suitable, yet moribund. Mr. Kearney was very serious and pious and had a "great brown beard" (91), brown being a universal color of decay and death. He lacked romantic inclinations while his wife still harbored them. Mr. Kearney provided and was a good father in that respect, but the bond between the two was emotionally lifeless. After opening the story with the

description of the mother and her marriage, Joyce goes into setting up the plot. We learn that Mrs. Kearney signs a contract for her daughter to perform in four concerts – she will receive eight guineas upon completion. Kathleen, the daughter, is not present when the deal is made, but is encouraged by her mother. Mrs. Kearney even goes out and buys expensive charmeuse fabric for Kathleen's dress in anticipation of the performances. The mother and daughter enter the concert hall with high hopes, only to find the auditorium dead and lifeless – hardly anyone is present. Mrs. Kearney is appalled at the lack of turnout, and is told that they had scheduled too many shows. She regards Mr. Fitzpatrick, the secretary of the Society, as having a “vacant” smile (93) in response to this obvious failure in planning.

The next day, on the night of the second show, the audience is loud and behaves rudely. This night Mrs. Kearney finds out that the shows are being so badly attended that they have canceled the third night. This sends her into panic mode, because she signed a contract to be paid for four nights. The cacophony at this point sets a harrowing tone. Mrs. Kearney, “beginning to be alarmed” (93), could find no one to answer her question. It is raining the night of the concert, and everyone is hoping that the “melancholy of the wet street” (93) doesn't ruin things. Later on, in order to get away from everyone, Mr. Holohan leads the man from the newspaper “along some torturous passages and up a dark staircase...to a secluded room...” (97). This description of where the men go to drink has double significance, because in one scene, they are entering a place with a deathlike description, and on the other hand, the darkness is a metaphor for the mens' roles in this story, which I will touch on later. The room is a gathering place for the men, who

are shown to be ineffective bystanders throughout the story, never truly getting anything done. Finally, death is referenced by the description of the soprano Madam Glynn's performance. It is described as being "bodiless" and "gasping," "with all the old-fashioned mannerisms of intonation and pronunciation which she believed lent elegance to her singing...She looked as if she had been resurrected from an old-stage wardrobe" (98). These allusions to oldness and decay are in direct opposition to Mrs. Kearney, who can be seen with her daughter passing judgment against Madam Glynn before the performance.

In this section I will examine the references Joyce makes to Irish culture at the time. In the very beginning, before we observe Mrs. Kearney and Mr. Hullohan's meeting, Joyce mentions that this is taking place during the Irish Revival. Nationalism and classical Irish culture are very important to the characters. The children send Irish picture postcards and learn from Irish teachers. The whole premise of the performance hall is a tribute to the Irish Revival, as Ireland saw so many new theaters and performance halls in Dublin gain in popularity with the renewed love of everything distinctively Irish. I found Mrs. Kearney to be distinctively Irish. She struck me as not being a person that goes with the flow, but rather blazes her own trail – even if it upsets others, she presses on, because she seeks truth and justice. Her detractors try to derail her, but she has her eye on what she wants and is steadfast in her belief that she is right. That pride was such a tremendous part of the Irish nationalism at that time, and I can't help but view Mrs. Kearney as an embodiment of this emerging zeal.

For my last point, I felt that the scene in the dressing room at the end was significant in regards to Joyce's references of Ireland. The room is split into two: Mr. And Mrs. Kearney, Mr. Bell, Miss Healy and another young lady are standing together, and everyone else is on the opposite side of the room. The two groups are at odds at that point, and although Joyce doesn't directly mention it, the reader can infer that tensions are running high and a few nasty looks are being thrown. For me, this was directly symbolic of the struggle between the Irish Catholics and the Protestants. The Catholics are being oppressed and told that they will be outcasts if they don't conform to the new "way." This is their faith, however, and though it is not binding like a legal document, it is more or less set in stone. It is a nice microcosm of religious struggles; both sides think they have it right. In this sense, I believe Mrs. Kearney is a loose representation of Mother Ireland; she is seen as crazy and overly emotional, and like Joyce's Ireland in "Ireland at the Bar," she seeks validation from those around her.

Finally, there is a feminist slant to the story. Most critics agree that Joyce demonizes his title character, advising by the end of the story that women need to be "put in their place." Suzette Henke argues, "Mrs. Kearney...is so obsessively motivated by greed and financial ambition that she compromises her daughter's musical career for the sake of bolstering her own ego and maintaining a self-righteous principle." ¹ However, I believe he accomplishes something far different. First of all, Mrs. Kearney is portrayed from the get-go as a smart and business-savvy woman. She is much more outspoken than her husband, and is involved in negotiating the terms of a contract, which historically has been a man's responsibility. In this sense, she is portrayed as

a provider for her child by ensuring that the correct payment is made. She stands up to Mr. Hullohan and Mr. Fitzpatrick, who repeatedly claim that it's not their responsibility to know all the details and stipulations should the circumstances change. These men, then, are depicted as ineffectual and unprofessional. Next to them Mrs. Kearney assumes the more dominant, masculine role, demanding justice. Later, as I mentioned in my first point, the men gather together to drink. They must navigate through dark quarters to reach the room. Again, colors paint pictures for Joyce; the darkness and the images of black and brown in the room are negative and symbolize corruption. Toward the end, the people orchestrating the show and the people in the actual performance point out how ridiculous Mrs. Kearney is, mocking her and telling each other that she doesn't deserve a single dime. Even Joyce as the third person narrator notes (through the mother's point of view), " They thought...they could ride roughshod over her" (99). Joyce touches on gender roles and stereotyping when Mrs. Kearney asserts that " They wouldn't have dared to have treated her like that if she had been a man" (99). That is a very austere indictment of the other characters in the story; if only in her mind, it is brought to light that the reason why she is being treated so poorly is because she is a female.

An aspect of my argument worth noting is Mrs. Kearney's refusal to actually state her problems with how she is being treated. As I said before, the story is in third person so that the free, indirect discourse is as much reflective of Joyce's thoughts as it is Mrs. Kearney's. Also, when talking to Mr. Fitzpatrick after the Friday night performance is canceled, she learns that he will not be able to help her and refers her to the Committee. Mrs. Kearney has to hold

her tongue to suppress the audacious and somewhat sarcastic remark, ““ And who is the Cometty pray?’ But she knew it would not be ladylike to do that: so she was silent” (94). Of course, silence was a virtue often impressed upon women at that time, so she was unlikely to lose all instincts about gender roles. She shows great restraint, which is admirable, but she feels as if she has to do it to be “ ladylike.”

This segues into my last argument for feminist symbolism. As I said, the mother knew her place and she knew when to be silent. Usually it is the husband who is outspoken and demanding in the relationship, but Mr. Kearney seems incredibly meek and demure compared to his wife. The whole setting of the auditorium is metaphorical for the importance Joyce lends to Mrs. Kearney. Usually a story about performing on stage will actually focus on the performers, but in “ A Mother’s” case, all the action and the story are focused behind the scenes: in the dressing rooms, in the back of the hall, and behind the curtains. To me this seems clearly symbolic of the woman in the marriage relationship. But instead of the male assuming control of the situations and problems, Joyce focuses in on the backdrop, behind the scenes: where Mrs. Kearney operates. He is attributing significance to her character; Mrs. Kearney, like Catholics, has power, but at the same time is considered wild and threatening if she tries to use it openly.

In conclusion, I believe there is more to Joyce’s “ A Mother” than merely what we read on the surface level. Joyce includes allusions to death and the Irish Revival, and also comments on the role of women in society through Mrs. Kearney’s character. Many of these allusions are interwoven, and I saw patterns regarding elements, for example: life and vibrancy, Ireland, and the

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woman are all seen in a favorable light. These juxtapositions cement in my mind the argument Joyce is trying to construct: a progressive and hopeful outlook for his homeland.