

# The boarding house

Life



The Boarding House is included in *Dubliners*, a collection of fifteen short stories by the Irish poet and novelist James Joyce, which was first published in 1914. This story of a boarding house, like the other stories in *Dubliners*, describes the lives of ordinary citizens of Dublin and illustrates their various qualities. There are three main characters - Mrs. Mooney, her daughter Polly and Mr. Doran. At the very beginning the author describes Mrs. Mooney, who relinquished a family traditional business - the butchery, and set up a boarding house in Hardwicke Street.

There is no reference to many of her outward appearances, the author probably thinks it is not important and he leaves the picture of Mrs. Mooney to the reader's imagination. However, he is very accurate in the description of her life and personality. He treats her as a courageous, strong, self-confident and imposing woman who dismissed her aggressive and worthless husband (she got a separation from him with care of the children). All the resident young men spoke of her as The Madam.

In the present emancipated world, where women are practically independent, equal to men, having their own businesses, it would be nothing unusual for a woman like that. However, the character of Mrs. Mooney was likely quite anomalous at the beginning of the twentieth century, when the story was published. It was men who greatly dominated, earned money, led businesses, while women took care of household and brought up children. Besides, divorces used to be followed just exceptionally. Despite of this, Mrs. Mooney is not faultless.

She can be cunning and intriguing and she has much trouble with her two incorrigible offsprings, who are described in detail in the following paragraphs. Jack Mooney, the Madam's son, who was clerk to a commission agent in Fleet Street, had the reputation of being a hard case. He was fond of using soldiers' obscenities; usually he came home in the small hours. Mrs. Mooney's other child is her daughter, Polly. Polly was a slim girl of nineteen; she had light soft hair and a small full mouth. Her eyes, which were grey with a shade of green through them, had a habit of glancing upwards when she spoke with anyone, which made her look like a little perverse madonna.

Mrs. Mooney had first sent her daughter to be a typist in a corn-factor's office but, as a disreputable sheriff's man used to come every other day to the office, asking to be allowed to say a word to his daughter, she had taken her daughter home again and set her to do housework. It is apparent that Mrs. Mooney kept her daughter from meeting men. Unfortunately, she was not very successful, because Polly flirted with young men lodged in the boarding house. In her mother's opinion these romances were just waste of time, none of them meant business or benefits.

Still one day she found that something was going on between Polly and one of the young men. She started spying on them quietly, pretending not to know anything. People in the house learnt of the affair too, so it could be a scandal. However, Mrs. Mooney still did not intervene. The story progressed on a bright Sunday morning in early summer. First of all, Mrs. Mooney interviewed Polly. Things were as she had suspected: she had been frank in her questions and Polly had been frank in her answers. Mrs. Mooney did not ask any more pointless questions.

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She had a great plan, according to religious rules: for every sin there must be made reparation. For her only one reparation could make up for the loss of her daughter's honour: marriage. If he married her daughter, Polly's future would be secured. She had a plenty of cogent arguments and she was sure that she would succeed that day. She knew quite a lot about Mr. Doran and his job: he had been working for thirteen years in a great Catholic wine-merchant's office and publicity of that affair would bring him the loss of his job. Then Polly visited Mr. Doran in his room, crying desperately.

They retrospected the past, how they first met, how Polly cared for him, heated him food, how they used to spend the nights together. But Mr. Doran disregarded his relation to Polly. She was just a kind of entertainment for him. He disliked her thoughtless behaviour, her origin and the way of her speech. He was afraid what his family and his friends would think of her. The hysterical and intriguing Polly started to cry even more and threatened with committing suicide in case Mr. Doran left her. She was interrupted by a servant, Mary. She said that Mrs. Mooney would like to talk to Mr. Doran downstairs.

He put on suitable clothes, let Mary cry on the bed and went to the Madam. On his way he met Jack Mooney and recollected the day when the violent Jack bawled at one London artiste threatening any fellow who would try that sort of a game on with his sister to put his teeth bloody well down his throat. Then we do not know what happened, there is no reference to Mrs. Mooney and Mr. Doran conversation. The following paragraphs describe just Polly's cry. And the last paragraphs of the story are quite clear: At last she heard her mother calling. She started to her feet and ran to the banisters.

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Polly! Polly! " " Yes, mamma? " " Come down, dear. Mr. Doran wants to speak to you. " Obviously, the scene must have continued, but nothing else is added, so the story is open-ended. The reader is probably supposed to believe that Mrs. Mooney's succeeded and forced Mr. Doran to marry Polly. Of course, there would be more options with a little imagination. Mr. Doran might have refused her suggestion, made a scene and left the boarding house. Even though, considering the conservative times and the country, Mrs. Mooney ultimately succeeded and Mr. Doran put up with marrying her daughter.