

# Resignation to a fate of clay



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In James Joyce's short story "Clay," fate forces Maria into a nun-like existence and keeps her from realizing her dream of marriage. She seems content with her position on the exterior, but several clues suggest this is not the case. Joyce makes this clear as he sets up the first half of the story in the Lamplight Laundry, presenting Maria at her best – loved and appreciated. In the second half, on the way to and at the Donnelly's house, her discomfort and disappointment become clear. By the end of the story, it is evident that Maria is resigned to the lot fate has cast her. The futility of Maria's dream of marriage is apparent throughout the story, which begins at the laundromat where Maria is employed. This section is permeated with references to Maria's similarities to a nun figure. Her name, Maria, is the first example. Joe, whom Maria looked after when he was a child, said "Mamma is mamma but Maria is my proper mother" (Joyce, 2442), drawing a connection between her and the Mother Mary. Her comforting voice is frequently heard saying "Yes, my dear, and No, my dear" (Joyce, 2441), reminiscent of the words of a priest listening to confessions. She is referred to as "a veritable peace-maker" (Joyce, 2441) by the women at the Laundromat and is known quite often to be the one who solves the problems of the ladies there. Even the way she cuts the barmbrack into "long thick even slices" (Joyce, 2441) almost seems to be a holy ritual, perfect and sanctified. Her preparations for the next day's Mass, laying out clothes and setting the clock in quiet and with precision, also suggest a holy ritual. Physically, Maria blends into the crowd. Her frame is described with phrases such as "very, very small" (Joyce, 2441), "minute" (Joyce, 2442) and, in her own opinion, "a nice tidy little body" (Joyce, 2442). This tendency to avoid any strong sexual suggestion in her appearance is also reflected in her reactions towards the

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suggestion of marriage, quietly waving it off and declining any thoughts of romance or a man in her life, although this declaration is betrayed by the narrator's description of the "disappointed shyness" (Joyce, 2442) expressed in her laughter. Her conversation with the "gentleman with the greyish moustache" (Joyce, 2443) on the tram was composed of his rambling comments and only "demure nods and hems" (Joyce, 2443) from her, showing the emotional distance she puts between herself and those around her, preventing anyone from getting in and keeping her from breaking out. Tension builds throughout the story as the reader senses Maria's struggle to break from her apparent destiny as a spinster. This becomes increasingly evident as Maria leaves the laundromat and attempts to assert her independence by travelling to visit the Donnellys. Before arriving, she stops to pick up some gifts for the family, a bag of penny cakes for the children and a big slice of almond-icing plumcake for Joe and his wife. The sales woman, "evidently annoyed by her" (Joyce 2443), sarcastically asked if she wanted wedding cake, adding insult to injury and painfully reminding Maria of her singleness. At the tram station, she thinks she has to stand because "none of the young men seemed to notice her" (Joyce, 2443), but a slightly drunk old man, whom she thinks looked like a colonel, makes room for her beside him. This conversation hints at a certain desire for Maria to have that romance in her life, something that's part of a dream for her, leading the reader to think that this might be the beginning of a possible romance to bring her out of this fated societal rut. In the end, though, the only memories Maria harbours of the man is "shame and vexation and disappointment" (Joyce 2443) for her lost plumcake. Her attempt to do something good, "her little surprise" (Joyce 2443) is thwarted by her friendly experience with this

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man, implying a sort of punishment for the momentary happiness resulting from the interaction. After the initial disappointment of the plumcake, it seems as though every successive incident adds to the feeling of displacement. Maria listens to Joe's stories of work but does not understand his humour. The neighbour's children, who are visiting for the night, bring out nuts to eat, but there is not a nutcracker, which makes Joe angry. Maria, in her role as a peace-maker, insists she really does not like nuts at all and not to bother. The Donnellys ask if Maria would like something to drink, and she declines, only to give in shortly after to avoid conflict. Maria tries to restore something of the wonderful world she knew before by gently mentioning Joe's brother Alphy, "who used to be the best of friends" (Joyce, 2443), but Joe rejects her firmly. These events lead the reader to feel uncomfortable for Maria and forces a tension on the story as it becomes plain that a life with family and children, as represented by the Donnellys, will never be a reality for Maria. As the night goes on, the family decides to play a traditional superstitious Hallow Eve game where a girl is blindfolded and must pick a plate to determine her destiny. This game is a metaphorical symbol for the grip that fate has on Maria's life. On one plate is a ring, symbolizing marriage in the next year, on the next is water, meaning she would emigrate and on the last is soil, or clay, symbolizing death. More contemporary versions used a prayer book instead of the last option, because of its morbidity. Here, though, a joke is played on Maria by the neighbour's children, possibly because they were earlier offended by the thievery accusation. The prayer book and ring were chosen once, the water three times. The game is described quickly in lively terms, and everyone is in good spirits and having fun, until Maria chooses and everything goes quiet.

She feels on her fingers a “ soft wet substance” (Joyce, 2444), but no one takes off her blindfold or says anything. Some whispering is done and the clay is replaced by, ironically, a prayer book. This scene is the climax of the story, emphasizing Maria’s fate which she chose, quite literally, blindfolded. The clay, symbolic of death, is placed on an equal level with the prayer book, symbolizing a life of solitude and separation. Afterwards, Mrs. Donnelly starts to play the piano in an attempt to ignore the cruel mistake and the mood is again cheerful. Before the children go to sleep, Joe asks Maria to sing and she hesitantly agrees, singing the first verse and refrain of the aria “ I Dreamt That I Dwelt in Marble Halls.” The verse speaks of a life in a wealthy kingdom of which she was “ the hope and pride” (Joyce, 2445) and “ could boast Of a high ancestral name” (Joyce, 2445). The second verse, which Maria avoids, whether by a Freudian mistake or on purpose, speaks of suitors and knights and marriage. She instead sings the first stanza again, and no one corrects her. She seems to quietly accept her predestined path by choosing to sing her song in a soft but powerful way that even moves Joe to tears. The disconnected way that the reader interacts with the events of the story is much the same that Maria interacts with her own life. There are no actual dialogues, only conversations as filtered through the narrator. It is almost as if Maria is in a bubble that she created to protect herself from the reality of her fate and things as they are. She is unwilling to assert herself and step out of her life, instead living, paralyzed within the confines that society has placed on a woman in her position. The story ends with the same tone that Joyce’s *Araby* does - resignation to a life that could only be broken through power of the will.