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"'O, SHE'S A NICE LADY!': A REREADING OF 'A MOTHER'"

"A Mother" is perhaps the most overlooked and underrated story in James Joyce's *Dubliners*. It is routinely accorded a (brief) chapter in book-length studies of *Dubliners*, or fit (usually with a great deal of strain) into various interpretive systems—symbolic, mythic, psychological, etc.—but independent critical essays about it are rare.¹ Most critics have concurred with Warren Beck that there is "less at stake" here than in other stories;² William York Tindall sees the story as "a simple and agreeable surface for our enjoyment."³ But as with all of the *Dubliners* stories, that "simple surface" hides a complex and subtle story which deserves a reexamination on its own merits as well as for its role in the overall structure of *Dubliners*.

"A Mother" is one of the four stories in the collection which features a female protagonist, and Mrs. Kearney is unusual in her status as a mature woman in a stable marriage. As one of the three

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that Joyce designated a story of "public life in Dublin," "A Mother" is of interest as a portrayal of a woman venturing outside the domestic sphere and interacting with men in a business situation. The story is also remarkable as a vivid portrait of a particular aspect of a particular place and time: the social and economic position of middle-class women in Dublin at the turn of the century is rendered with devastating precision. As in the other two stories of public life, Joyce exposes the pervasive taint of money; in "A Mother," it touches art, politics, and the relations between women and men as well. Nationalism, feminism, the business of art, and the business of marriage are all deftly interwoven. Joyce shows women and men living in a time of social transition, trying to negotiate the precarious divisions between public and private with no guidelines other than those that a conservative and repressive Irish society could provide.

For most critics, Mrs. Kearney's gender has proven to be as much of a barrier to critical insight and understanding as it is for the characters she encounters in the story: they all seem unsure how to "read" a strong, outspoken woman in a public situation. Although critics can usually summon up some sympathy even for Farrington in "Counterparts," and for all the other trapped, failed characters in *Dubliners*, they judge and criticize Mrs. Kearney harshly and unsympathetically. Rather than deal with the social circumstances surrounding her crisis, or with the story's strange and disturbing tone, critics have tended to simplify and trivialize "A Mother," writing Mrs. Kearney off as a "virago,"⁴ and concluding that the story is merely a humorous satire of the Irish Revival movement. Many of these critics seem aware of the thinness of their critical approach to the story and admit to dissatisfaction or confusion, but in the end, they blame Joyce, or more specifically the story, for not being entirely successful.

"A Mother" does not fit easily into critical categories or systems, even with all its troubling aspects smoothed over. In his analysis of the symbols in *Dubliners*, Tindall can only conclude that Mrs. Kearney is "an unassigned symbol—that is . . . a meaningful thing of uncertain meaning."⁵ Other critics have attempted, with mixed results, to find some "key" to the story in the names

of its characters, both in terms of the backgrounds of traditional Irish names and in relation to actual people in Dublin.⁶ Mary Reynolds details fascinating correspondences between *Dubliners* and Dante's *Inferno*; her description of a complacent "venal ruling establishment," which freezes Dublin into "conformity," applies precisely to the circumstances of "A Mother." Yet the Dantean "sin" Reynolds specifically ascribes to "A Mother"—fomenting discord—pertains only to Mrs. Kearney as an individual and not to the larger social group within which she is placed.⁷

Indeed, the main problem with these interpretations of symbols and structures is that they do not confront the social aspect of the story, despite Joyce's categorization of it. Like "Ivy Day in the Committee Room" and "Grace," "A Mother" has a variety of characters, and the narration, for the most part, remains distanced and impersonal, with only occasional indications of the thoughts of Mrs. Kearney and others. "A Mother" is clearly not a psychological portrait along the lines of "Eveline," and it differs from "Clay" and "The Boarding House" in its breadth. Yet critics persist in isolating Mrs. Kearney from her environment; she is scrutinized as a "type" of "Woman," rather than as a Dubliner in a public situation, and the minor characters are seen as merely colorful set pieces.⁸ This myopia regarding the actual circumstances of Mrs. Kearney's angry protest contributes to the astonishing double standard evident in two well known analyses of "A Mother."

Although Beck emphasizes in his introduction to his study of *Dubliners* "the equilibrium of empathy and perspective" in the stories (Beck 10), as well as a "deeply rooted ambivalence" (34), he disregards these general descriptions in his reading of "A Mother." He declares that Joyce is "disdainful of his chief character" (260), who is "a plain target of satire" (262), "insufferable" (276), and "an utter failure" (272). Unstinting in his pejorative descriptions of Mrs. Kearney ("rampant," "raging," "unendurable," etc.), Beck characterizes her insistence upon fair treatment for her daughter as an "obsessive demand for equality" (269). When Beck concludes that "the defeat of Mrs. Kearney is to be fully approved of" (276), he drains the story of its carefully wrought tensions and flattens it into a simple satire with an obvious villain. By focusing at length

on what he finds unacceptable in Mrs. Kearney, and by viewing the men in the story as mere victims of her wrath, Beck loses his perspective on the complexities and ambiguities in this particular story and on Joyce's fictional techniques as well.

Hayman also loses his critical bearings in his strong disapproval of Mrs. Kearney, whom he describes as "a sour presence, a succubus among the drinking and the good cheer"; the only motivation he attributes to her is a kind of penis envy (Hayman 130). In his denouncements of her, he gets carried away from the actual text; he calls her a woman "beyond her prime," "powerfully bent on social climbing," who was "rejected by Dublin's fine young men"; he describes her daughter as "unpromising," with only "an artisan's skill" as a pianist (124-25). Yet none of this information is present or even intimated in the story. It is as if Hayman's own "pent-up rage and venom" (125) against Mrs. Kearney and her "type" spills over into his critical discourse and distorts his reading of the story.

I have focused upon these two critical interpretations because their vehemence and asperity seem inextricably tied up with tacit assumptions on the part of the critics as to how a woman should behave. Yet despite their extratextual biases, these analyses are accepted as the standard "readings" of this story: the most casual or passing references to "A Mother" are always based upon the assumption that Mrs. Kearney is a social-climbing harridan. Even Suzette Henke, who begins her feminist analysis of the women in *Dubliners* with an indictment of critics who tend to "blame the victim," goes on to criticize Mrs. Kearney for being "self-willed" and "shrewish" and bemoans her lack of "team spirit" in her dealings with "a male-dominated group."⁹ Henke's own confusion about who is the victim and who is the victimizer in the story points to both the strong influence that existing criticism exerts over new readings and to the difficulty for all critics of avoiding stereotypes of male and female behavior.

What follows is an alternative reading of "A Mother," one that attempts to resist both prior critical responses to the story and standard expectations of female behavior.¹⁰ What is most needed is a fresh response to Mrs. Kearney: I want to examine her as other

characters in *Dubliners* have been examined—in depth, as a protagonist, with both scrutiny and sympathy—and view the story as one of public life, as well as in the context of the collection as a whole. What I hope to redeem is not only the subtle and sensitive nature of Joyce's characterization of Mrs. Kearney, but also the richness of the story. It is not merely a spoof of the Irish Revival and middle-class morality and greed. "A Mother" deals with the major themes present in the other *Dubliners* stories, but as they specifically relate to a woman: it is a tale of paralysis—of the trap not only of Dublin, but of gender; it is a tale of simony—of the influence money exerts over art and relationships between women and men; and it is a tale of gnomon—of romantic disillusionment and unfulfilled and incomplete lives.

Much has been made of the presence of the Irish Revival movement in "A Mother." The story is usually seen as a satire on the movement itself, exposing it as superficial, regressive, or merely a front for social advancement. The low level of artistry in the concerts is certainly a comment upon the awkward efforts of the movement to combine culture and politics. But what critics have failed to notice is that Mrs. Kearney's interest in the Irish Revival is unabashedly pragmatic—she "believes" in it no more than Joyce did himself.¹¹ It is the *Eire Abu* Society that is disorganized and unscrupulous, not Mrs. Kearney; and it is Mr. Holohan, Mr. Fitzpatrick, and Miss Beirne, who, as the foremost representatives of the Irish Revival in the story, bear the weight of Joyce's ridicule.

Similarly, although Joyce is mocking the mediocre state of the arts in Ireland in "A Mother," Mrs. Kearney again is exempt, for the most part, from the mockery. She has been well trained, as has her daughter, whom people call "clever at music" (138). She also appears to be knowledgeable about the abilities and reputations of the various *artistes* who appear. It is Mr. Holohan who fills the initial concerts with second-rate talent (whose lack of ability Mrs. Kearney recognizes at once), and presumably it is Mr. Holohan who chose the untalented Madame Glynn. But although "A Mother" is in part about misguided attempts at Irish "art," just as "Ivy Day in the Committee Room" is about the pettiness of

Irish politics, and "Grace" is about the debasement of the Catholic Church, that is not its primary focus. The hapless concerts of the *Eire Abu* Society form the context within which Mrs. Kearney reaches a crisis. The Antient Concert Rooms come to represent the male-controlled public arena of Dublin, where, out of choice or necessity, women found themselves with increasing frequency.

"A Mother" takes place in an era of significant changes for women, during which they emerged from their domestic sphere, either in order to find a husband or to support themselves. The particular demographics and dismal economic conditions of late nineteenth-century Ireland, and the spread of the dowry system, created a "marriage market" in which both men and women were forced to be extremely competitive and mercenary in their approach to marriage.¹² Mrs. Kearney's marriage to an older, established man who could provide economic security is thus typical of the time, as is her energetic promotion of her dowered daughter: by the turn of the century, the marriage situation in Ireland had deteriorated to the extent that Kathleen is unable simply to sit, as her mother did, waiting for suitors to call.

Employment opportunities for women in Dublin were even more limited than their marriage prospects.¹³ Mrs. Kearney's desire to establish a public reputation for her daughter is not an indication of a passion for social climbing (she is never shown trying to rise above her class or her means), but rather is a practical response to a bleak situation. She does give Kathleen an education similar to the one that proved useless to herself, yet she determines that Kathleen's will be expedient. The field of music was one of the best ways for women to make a living, though they usually chose teaching over the arduous and risky path of a concert career.¹⁴ Mrs. Kearney's intentions are not specified, but by promoting her daughter through the revival movement and her music, she is able to keep her options open. Even if her musical career never takes off, the fact that "the name of Miss Kathleen Kearney began to be heard often on people's lips" (138) would prove to be beneficial for subsequent teaching opportunities or introductions to marriageable young men.

The Irish Revival forms an ideal context for an examination

of what happens when women enter the public world. The burgeoning nationalist movement for Home Rule and its allied organizations such as the Gaelic League, which promoted Irish language and culture, provided significant opportunities for women to further their education and work outside of the home in a socially acceptable fashion. But while the sphere of activity for women was enlarged, their status remained unaltered. For the most part, women were assigned traditionally "feminine" tasks in the nationalist organizations; they were involved with cultural events and other fundraising activities but were expected to stay in the background when it came to political issues and policymaking.¹⁵ Despite changes in the external circumstances of their lives, gender roles remained rigidly defined, and no new rules of behavior had been formulated to apply to women in the public world. In "A Mother," Mrs. Kearney expects everything to be genteel, and she tries to control her daughter's activities as she would chaperone a courtship in her home. But it becomes clear that the decorum of the drawing room is ineffectual in the concert hall; the situation in the Antient Concert Rooms rudely reminds her that she is in the real dirty world, and she struggles to find a way in which to cope.

As Joyce accurately depicts, the encroachment of women into a formerly sacred male territory sets the stage for inevitable conflict. Many women involved in the campaign for Home Rule naturally became interested in working for their own political representation. But predominantly Catholic Ireland viewed women who demanded equality with alarm and suspicion: the feminists and suffragists were criticized and often ostracized from nationalist organizations for distracting the public's attention from the more "important" issue of Home Rule.¹⁶ Similarly, Mrs. Kearney's insistence upon payment is criticized as being inappropriate and unladylike and is seen as a distraction from the "true" purpose of the concert—supposedly that of disinterested promotion of Irish music.

Two works written at about the same time as "A Mother" (both of which contain references to the Irish Revival) confirm Joyce's interest in the changing circumstances of modern women's

lives. In "The Dead," Lily, unexpectedly bitter about sexual matters, and Miss Ivors, aggressively political, both jolt Gabriel Conroy out of his complacency and nostalgia into the reality of the present moment. In *Stephen Hero*, Stephen Daedalus observes with painful scrutiny the social and economic conditions that ruined his mother's life and made that of his sister Isabel useless. Critics often fail to see the precision and sensitivity of these portraits due to Joyce's aloof narrative stance, or Stephen's emotional distance, or because of certain remarks Joyce is said to have made about women and feminism. But Joyce's work contradicts the misogynistic quips attributed to him, and in that way is similar to the fiction of George Moore, an early influence upon Joyce. Both men were interested in presenting with uncompromising fidelity the lives of ordinary people—men and women—and both wrote with a deep understanding of their society; despite the dispassion of their narrative voices, compassion and anger linger just below the surface of their stories. What results might be called sub-intentionally feminist, for these authors depict women within their society with an unsentimental honesty that reveals the inequities and oppressions that have shaped their lives.¹⁷ Mrs. Kearney is an interesting figure, not as a "type" of woman, but as one who, neither responsible for nor defeated by the circumstances of her life, tries vigorously to move and change with the times; she is active and practical in a way that few other characters in *Dubliners* are. But by attempting to avoid the paralysis that the other characters succumb to, Mrs. Kearney threatens the status quo, and the crux of the story is how vehemently Dublin resists her.

Mrs. Kearney is introduced in two remarkable paragraphs that are filled with an enormous amount of information about her life and her marriage—information that most critics rapidly forget. She spends her Victorian girlhood receiving a "high-class" education in French and music, which leaves her full of "romantic desires," but ultimately isolated "amid the chilly circle of her accomplishments." The "brilliant life" she dreams of is hopelessly at odds with the reality of Dublin and the "ordinary" young men she meets (136). Her friends, knowing nothing about her hopes or her high standards, see her only as a potential spinster. This mis-

understanding and her angry response to it anticipate the misunderstanding and anger later in the story: the "spite" out of which she marries is not any inherent maliciousness of character, but rather a response to a stifling and disappointing world. Like the boy in "Araby" or Little Chandler in "A Little Cloud," Miss Devlin's secret exotic fantasies are threatened by the drab actuality of Dublin, and she is finally forced to capitulate and marry Mr. Kearney. Although her romantic desires are presented as mildly humorous (consoled as they are by the consumption of large quantities of "Turkish Delight"), the statement, "she never put her own romantic ideas away" (137), is not ironic and explains much of Mrs. Kearney's subsequent behavior. Despite all outward appearances, Mrs. Kearney was, and remains, a romantic.

She achieves her own kind of triumph in her practical and wise choice of Mr. Kearney, who she believes will "wear better than a romantic person" (137). Apart from the Conroys' in "The Dead," the Kearneys' marriage is exceptional among those presented in *Dubliners*; it defies the stereotypes. The husband is the pious one, not the wife; he is sober and thrifty as well. And though it is obvious that Mrs. Kearney gets her own way in the marriage, it is also clear that she cares for her husband and is "a good wife to him" (137). It may sound dull and bourgeois, but in a world filled with alcoholic husbands, downtrodden wives, and abused children, the Kearneys' marriage is an achievement. Mrs. Kearney chooses to survive and thrive rather than be stifled by the absence of romance in Dublin or its wretched economic conditions. And it is this unabashed and incongruous coexistence of romantic notions and shrewd practicality within Mrs. Kearney that makes many readers as well as the people in the story uncomfortable with her.

The extent to which Mrs. Kearney enters "heart and soul" (138) into the planning of the concerts with Mr. Holohan indicates that she still dreams of a "brilliant life": she desires some kind of personal satisfaction and creative activity as well. There is very little mention of Kathleen in all the planning; it is Mrs. Kearney who is truly interested and invigorated by this excursion from her usual life. So when the evening of the first concert finally arrives,

Mrs. Kearney is filled not only with hopes for her daughter, but also with a sense of pride in herself. It is important to bear in mind the large personal investment that romantic Mrs. Kearney has made in preparation for these concerts (and not just the "pretty penny" she spent on Kathleen's dress or the tickets for their friends). Her subsequent disappointment and anger have as much to do with the dreams and disillusion of her girlhood as with any violation of a contract.

Her disappointment begins as soon as she steps out of her home, where all the planning had taken place, into the public world of the concert hall. "She did not like the look of things": the phrase is repeated (139-40). The young men working as ushers are not in evening dress, the hall is nearly empty, the publicity has obviously been inadequate, and the *artistes* are "no good" (140). Once again her romantic ideas have been shattered, mainly by men. Mr. Fitzpatrick, the secretary of the Society, has "a white vacant face," a "flat" accent, and his dress and actions are repugnant to Mrs. Kearney (139-40). Mr. Holohan is no longer as amiable as he was in her drawing-room, where she treated him with wine and biscuits. The second-night audience is ill mannered, and the third concert is cancelled. What was imagined at home to be a crowning achievement is exposed to be low class and rudely public and a financial cheat as well. The failure of the concerts brings renewed disenchantment with the circumstances of her life, and it is that which lies behind Mrs. Kearney's later protestations about Kathleen's payment. As before, Mrs. Kearney finds her plans tainted by the ugly reality and avariciousness of Dublin. Romance remains an impossibility.

But also as before, Mrs. Kearney derives strength from her disappointment and acts in order to survive. All the interactions in this story are economic ones, and when the veneer of romance is stripped away from the concerts, Mrs. Kearney has no qualms about being open about what is rightfully due her. If the concerts had created a proper atmosphere for the promotion of her daughter, with the best *artistes* and good audiences, then she would have been satisfied with the transaction. But when she sees that her ideal vision will not be realized, largely due to the ineptitude of

the men involved, she wants to be sure of financial reimbursement. The commonness and disorder of the concerts force Mrs. Kearney to confront the situation realistically: she wants to put Kathleen on stage for economic reasons—either to start a musical career or find a husband—and the promotion of Irish culture, or even ultimately, romance, has nothing to do with it.

The alarm Mrs. Kearney feels at being cheated is very real. As the wife of a bootmaker, she is not so well off that money does not matter to her, and while romance inspired the purchase of the pink charmeuse, practicality dictates that her investment be repaid. But although she can deal with being explicit about her motives, the others involved cannot. Mrs. Kearney's insistence upon speaking about payment breaks social codes of silence; she exposes the economic basis of what the *artistes* and the Society want to pretend is a pure expression of love of country and of art. The baritone, silently relieved at having already been paid, protests that she "might have taken the *artistes* into consideration" (147); the supremacy of art as well as the proper behavior of women are hypocritically invoked as being more important than crass considerations of money.

It is in this context that Miss Healy provides an example of the socially approved mode of exchange for a woman. She offers her goods ("the warmth, fragrance and colour of her body"—145) to the *Freeman* man, for free, hoping for a payoff—perhaps a good review. But the nature of the exchange determines that the advantage is with the man, to accept or reject, to pay or not pay; in this case, Miss Healy is cheated. Mr. Hendricks decides "to turn the moment to account" and enjoy Miss Healy's presence, all the while knowing that he is not going to write the review himself (145). Mrs. Kearney, armed with her contract, refuses to let her daughter offer herself up in such a risky and submissive fashion, and her insistence upon control is condemned.

Because of her domination over her daughter, Mrs. Kearney is often compared to Mrs. Mooney in "The Boarding House," but these comparisons ignore crucial differences between the two women. Indeed many errors arise out of the tendency of critics to conflate the two, attributing Mrs. Mooney's ambition and under-

handed scheming to Mrs. Kearney. But Mrs. Mooney's practicality is untouched by any romantic ideas—she is as sharp and businesslike as a meat cleaver. There is a sense of amorality and trickery about her dealings that is very different from the socially proper (and transparent) methods by which Mrs. Kearney promotes her daughter. But although Mrs. Mooney is more streetwise than Mrs. Kearney, she and her business remain within her domestic purview, and she is thus able to control the circumstances of her life and succeed in her unsavory plan: she is perhaps the only success in *Dubliners*.

Mrs. Kearney actually has more in common with Mrs. Sinico in "A Painful Case." Both are mothers of daughters, fond of music, and through music, are drawn into the public world. Mrs. Sinico takes the initiative when she speaks to Mr. Duffy at a concert; yet when she again takes the initiative to shift their relationship into a romance, Mr. Duffy is shocked, and he spurns her. As is the case with Mrs. Kearney, Mrs. Sinico's boldness and romantic ideas are rudely rejected. Both women resemble the other *Dubliners* in the book in that they are victims, in part, of the external circumstances of their lives. But their gender adds yet another degree of confinement to all the others imposed by Dublin society, the Irish economy, and the Church. The social roles prescribed for them allow even fewer opportunities for escape or relief than the men of Dublin have. Paralysis, in the cases of Mrs. Sinico and Mrs. Kearney, has no internal source, for they try their best to escape the stifling conditions of their lives. Conformity and stasis are outwardly imposed upon them in the guise of codes of proper female behavior.

What finally defeats Mrs. Kearney is neither her romantic disillusionment nor her economic pragmatism, but rather her gender. She is allowed into the public world of men, but she soon discovers she is permitted no volition there: her power disappears when she leaves her home. The larger world only has need of women as employees, or performers, or objects of desire—not as bosses or managers. Mrs. Kearney tries to adjust to the new exigencies of the socioeconomic conditions of Dublin and equates being a good mother with being a good businesswoman. But her education and

socialization have left her ill-equipped to compete with men in a business situation. The "ladylike" behavior that Mrs. Kearney tries to maintain, and that others expect of her, hampers and restricts her at every turn. And it is the peculiar double bind that she finds herself in that makes the story so painful and disturbing, despite all its elements of humor. Dublin crushes Mrs. Kearney's romantic dreams, but when she turns to active practicality, it refuses her success there as well. Her rage arises out of a situation that guarantees her impotence.

"When the women had done the work, they were set aside," wrote Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington (a friend of Joyce's) about the activities of the Ladies' Land League, an Irish nationalist group.¹⁸ This pattern of women working behind the scenes but receiving no credit was characteristic of Catholic Ireland and appears in "A Mother" and several other stories in *Dubliners*. Thus, it is appropriate that what is most often elided in the usual discussions of "A Mother" is the amount of work Mrs. Kearney does for Mr. Holohan in organizing the concerts. "Mr Holohan called to see her every day to have her advice on some point. She was invariably friendly and advising—homely, in fact" (138). In the private domestic space of her drawing-room, Mrs. Kearney is comfortably in control, and Mr. Holohan is happy to give her sovereignty there. But because Mr. Holohan is a man who is public, official, and visible in his organizational capacity, he gets all the credit, even though he is basically ineffectual. When Mrs. Kearney attempts to continue her control once the concerts have begun and exclaims "—I'm not done with you yet," Mr. Holohan retorts, "—But I'm done with you" (149). While "in the end it was Mrs. Kearney who arranged everything" (136), she is publicly perceived as merely an intrusive stage mother.

What Mrs. Kearney does in "A Mother" is transgress the boundaries that separate the worlds of public and private, male and female. When she insists that Mr. Holohan acknowledge her importance and involvement publicly, in the presence of men, she commits a breach of sexual etiquette. In *Dubliners*, Joyce depicts an Ireland where the women are the ones who hold things to-

gether, who are the practical caretakers of the family, and where the men tend to be the weak ones, the feckless dreamers and drunks. But there is an unspoken agreement that this matriarchal control must always be covert and private: the fiction of the patriarchy in Ireland must be maintained. Mrs. Kearney threatens to expose that fiction, just as she threatens the fiction of disinterested love of art and country that the *Eire Abu* Society wishes to promote. The men in "A Mother" are more interested in talking and drinking in the back room than they are in managing the concerts. But they do not want their disorganization to be exposed by Mrs. Kearney's persistence and perfectionism, and they bristle at being reminded of their responsibilities and their failings, by a woman, in a public place.

The placement of "A Mother" in the collection (between two stories almost exclusively concerned with men) reinforces the fact that Mrs. Kearney is outnumbered and out of place: she has trespassed into the midst of a male-dominated world, and the "Committee" that she does battle with is anticipated by the "committee room" in the previous story. The anomalous aspect of a mother being in such a milieu is confirmed by the critics who try, by the nature of their analyses, to take her out of that location and put her back into the private, more psychological sphere of the earlier stories. That the story opens and closes with a description of Mr. Holohan instead of the title character also emphasizes that Mrs. Kearney is an outsider and an intruder.

In the Antient Concert Rooms, Mrs. Kearney is clearly at a disadvantage. The very structure of the physical layout of the hall denies her power. When she wants to talk with Mr. Holohan or Mr. Fitzpatrick, she goes "all over the building looking" for them, but "She could find neither" (141). The men, on the other hand, are familiar with the "tortuous passages" of the hall and have their own "secluded room" (145), where they can drink in privacy and escape from such difficulties as Mrs. Kearney. It is emphasized over and over that the men are at home in this public space: Mr. O'Madden Burke and Mr. Hendrick, though in outdoor dress, "tak[e] possession of the fireplace" (144); Mr. O'Madden Burke

later finds the room with the drinks "by instinct" (145); Mr. Holohan serves lemonade, and Mr. Fitzpatrick sticks his head out from backstage to joke with his friends in the audience.

For as long as possible, Mr. Holohan and Mr. Fitzpatrick try to avoid any confrontation or responsibility concerning the contract, as they rush away, play dumb, or palm Mrs. Kearney off on Miss Beirne, a supernumerary of the Society. But when these attempts to defuse Mrs. Kearney prove ineffective, the men invoke "the Committee," a body of absolute power and inaccessibility. Representative of male control, male solidarity, and male superiority, the institution of the Committee is exploited to the fullest by the men; they expect its authority to silence Mrs. Kearney's complaints. But Mrs. Kearney, who appreciates her husband for "his abstract value as a male" (141), is accustomed to thinking of male authority as merely a useful abstraction: she remains undaunted. Perhaps she makes a tactical error by not countering and exploiting her husband's value as a male; instead, she relegates him to the "feminine" task of being in charge of their daughter's music and clothes. But Mr. Holohan and Mr. Fitzpatrick have no qualms about hiding behind their emblem of male authority, and they expect Mrs. Kearney to accept the dictates of the Committee as law.

One of the ironies of the situation is that the law of Mrs. Kearney's contract is also an abstract entity, one which she thinks is sanctioned by men and will protect her in their world. She believes she has taken the proper precautions in her business deal, and she clings to the contract as her passport to fair treatment and respect. Her anger is due in part to the immense frustration she feels when the men change the rules on her: Mr. Holohan, who brought the contract for Kathleen to sign, later protests that it is not "his business" (144). The men act as if the contract is mutable, or debatable, and Mrs. Kearney's repeated emphasis on her legal rights is an indication of her shock at their disregard for the law and her ignorance of any other method of getting her way in the world of men.¹⁹ She can command her husband with a movement of her eyebrow, but she is at a loss as to how to deal with men who respect neither her authority nor that of their own

laws. If the law will not protect her, and society dictates that she is to remain quiet and submissive, how does a "lady" stand up for herself in public?

The extreme pressure upon Mrs. Kearney, both internal and external, to maintain a ladylike decorum, is most clearly indicated by her struggle to remain silent. Although the failure of the first concert and Mr. Fitzpatrick's behavior irritate her very much, "she said nothing and waited to see how it would end" (140). During the Thursday night concert, when Mrs. Kearney's panic and anger begin to emerge, she longs to mock both Mr. Fitzpatrick and his retreat behind the Committee by asking, "—And who is the Committee, pray?" (141). But "she knew that it would not be ladylike to do that: so she was silent" (141). By the Saturday night concert, however, she can hold her tongue no longer, and her outspoken insistence that her daughter be paid, her "conduct," is "condemned on all hands" (149); even her usually reticent husband asks her "to lower her voice" (145). Mr. Holohan's insult to Mrs. Kearney at the end of their penultimate confrontation speaks for everyone's reaction to her shocking volubility: "—I thought you were a lady" (149). The rules of the game dictate that she cannot speak up or complain or insist and still be considered a lady, and the extent to which she has shaken up the game is indicated by Mr. Holohan's amazement and agitation as he repeats his final sarcastic judgment of Mrs. Kearney: "—That's a nice lady! . . . O, she's a nice lady!" (149).

As the power struggle develops and Mrs. Kearney realizes how negligible her status is in the public world, she finds herself becoming increasingly outspoken about her rights and the biased treatment Kathleen has received: "They wouldn't have dared to have treated her like that if she had been a man" (148). Every point she brings up with Mr. Holohan is legitimate: "the Committee had treated her scandalously"; "She had spared neither trouble nor expense"; all that she wants are her "rights" but she is continually denied "a civil answer" (148-49). But Mr. Holohan (like so many of the critics) turns the situation around and insists that Mrs. Kearney is the guilty one, rather than the victim of his own ineptitude and shiftlessness. Mr. Holohan's insult and the

inequity and impossibility of the situation render Mrs. Kearney speechless once more, in that her words are no longer transcribed in the text. Although she remains arguing with her daughter and husband at the door, her rage is at this point futile and abortive; she has been effectively silenced; she has no outlet for expression, and her language degenerates into mere gesticulation. She has relinquished her status as a "lady," and she really has nothing more to say that anyone will listen to, although she makes a final attempt (149).

Mrs. Kearney pathetically waits for someone to approach her just as she once waited for suitors to brave "the chilly circle" for her. But the continuation of the concert points to her superfluity, and the substitution of Miss Healy as an accompanist emphasizes that young women in Irish society are merely abundant and interchangeable commodities; neither Kathleen nor her mother is "worth" anything anymore. The external circumstances of the concert join with the agonizingly unfair double standard being forced upon her, and Mrs. Kearney, for an instant, stands frozen like "an angry stone image" (149), the most blatant figure of paralysis in the book. That the reader is given no final insight into her state of mind, that she is forced to leave, and that Mr. O'Madden Burke gets the last word, all underscore Mrs. Kearney's powerlessness and marginality in the public milieu of Dublin.

But Mrs. Kearney's side of the story cannot be adequately considered without a discussion of the narrative voice and tone of "A Mother." The tone is so elusive and the narrative so distanced that both can be interpreted in a variety of ways in order to support radically different readings of the story. Although the beginning of the story prepares the reader for a comic, or at least lighthearted tale, the story takes a decidedly ugly turn, and the final pages contain little that could be construed as unambiguously humorous.²⁰ The intensity of the anger of Mrs. Kearney and Mr. Holohan, and the lack of any satisfactory conclusion to their confrontation end the story with a sense of suffocating frustration and rage. Despite Mr. O'Madden Burke's final proclamation, no one is given the satisfaction of an unequivocal triumph—moral, economic, or otherwise.

Most critical interpretations of the narrative voice of "A Mother" agree about its detachment but differ concerning the degree to which Mrs. Kearney's point of view is represented.²¹ Although told in an aloof and anonymous third-person, the narrative is always shifting, almost imperceptibly, from an objective stance to less neutral observations which, because of their perspective or particular choice of words, appear to be those of Mrs. Kearney. Thus we frequently partake of Mrs. Kearney's point of view, but because of the carefully maintained impartiality of tone, we are never given explicit signs of narratorial agreement or disapproval. As the story progressively involves a larger cast of characters, the narrative pulls back from Mrs. Kearney: we are given fewer and fewer impressions or opinions that could be construed as hers, while we are told increasingly more about her external appearance. But even those descriptions are carefully factual in tone, and we are left alone at the climax of the story to judge Mrs. Kearney for ourselves. That Joyce's narrator presents us with a wealth of information about the title character but declines to pass any explicit judgment upon her is an indication that one of the things the story is about is *how* to judge her. When, either through slyly critical descriptions of the other characters, or by subtle hints in the language of the narration, the narrative voice quietly abdicates its neutrality, we are given important directions for reading, which point to Joyce's implicit attitudes. The social context of the story is crucial: it is only by looking at the entire complex of Mrs. Kearney's social circumstances, the nature of the people she encounters, and their responses to her, that we can fully understand her and the story.

The men she deals with are, for the most part, inept, ill-mannered, and flawed in some way. Mr. Holohan, who is known as "Hoppy" because of his "game leg," is depicted with "his hands and pockets full of dirty pieces of paper" (136). It is he who first becomes "very red and excited" and speaks "volubly," not Mrs. Kearney (146). Mr. Fitzpatrick, his accent "flat," his hat "soft" and "carelessly" worn, is "little," and he chews his programme into "a moist pulp." His vacant smile and ability "to bear disappoint-

ment lightly" are emblematic of the ignorant complacency of Dublin (139).

But it is Mr. O'Madden Burke who is the object of the sharpest satire. He is "suave" and "imposing," but mainly because of his "magniloquent western name" and his "large silk umbrella" (145), both of which he uses to support himself and his reputation. Although "widely respected," he has a problem with his finances. Indeed, he is based upon an actual Dubliner, O'Leary Curtis, who had a reputation for leaving a bar whenever it was his turn to buy a round of drinks.²² Even though he is an outsider, present only as a reporter, he enters fully into the conflict and is outspoken in pronouncing his judgment upon Mrs. Kearney: "it was the most scandalous exhibition he had ever witnessed." Showing no mercy for the financial problems of others, O'Madden Burke sweepingly declares that "Miss Kathleen Kearney's musical career was ended in Dublin," and that she should be paid nothing (147-48). After the Kearneys depart, Mr. O'Madden Burke places himself, "poised upon his umbrella in approval," as the moral arbiter of the situation, and speaks the final line of the story: "—You did the proper thing, Holohan" (149). Certainly there is fierce irony in this final scene of these two ineffectual men, one limping up and down the room in a rage, the other leaning upon the prop of his umbrella, taking it upon themselves to decree that Mrs. Kearney has not behaved like a true "lady."

There is irony as well in the statement "Miss Healy had kindly consented to play one or two accompaniments" (149), but the different tone of the narrative might cause the reader to miss it. Miss Healy's actions would perhaps be kind if she were just another one of the hired performers. But Miss Healy is one of Kathleen's "Nationalist friends" (137, 143), whom the Kearneys "had often invited . . . to their house" (148). Though "a great friend of Kathleen's" (148), she is the "scab" who breaks Kathleen's strike and allows the concert to go on. Her betrayal is an indictment of the false fellowship of the revival movement, and more generally, calls to mind Ireland's troubled heritage of betrayals.

The story comments upon the larger nature of Ireland in another way as well. The performers and the members of the Society

who gather in increasing numbers to condemn Mrs. Kearney are not unlike the "modern hypocrites" who contributed to Parnell's downfall (and who are mentioned in the poem in "Ivy Day in the Committee Room"); the Irish mob intent upon laying someone low is an image that recurs in Joyce's fiction. With no knowledge of the contract or the details of the situation, all enter "hotly" into the fray, eager to denounce deviance and nonconformity. The language in the final scene of the story emphasizes this deterioration from a civilized evening of musical performance into almost a primitive rite of castigation and ostracism. While the audience is "clapping," "stamping," and "whistling," sides are chosen backstage, and the two tribes stand on opposite ends of the room. As the antagonism builds, Mrs. Kearney, seemingly fed up with words and contracts, looks "as if she would attack someone with her hands" (148). The "angry stone image" (149) she is finally turned into seems ancient, mythic. And what happens is mythic as well: the mob gathers to censure any expression of individuality, and by punishing and banishing a scapegoat, they validate their own worth—"everyone approved of what the Committee had done" (149). Mr. Holohan's first response to Mrs. Kearney's departure is to try frantically "to cool himself for he felt his skin on fire" (149). Mrs. Kearney's actions and words have generated unwanted heat, which spreads throughout the crowd, and they expel her in order to return to the frozen stasis they are used to.

It is difficult to imagine the author of "The Day of the Rabblement" approving of the kind of mob action and mentality that surfaces in the final pages of the story, even if the entire incident is ultimately trivial in import. Despite Mrs. Kearney's desire for social acceptance, she emerges as a nonconformist or a rebel, a type Joyce always viewed with some sympathy. And perhaps the key to locating the presence of this sympathy in the story is the figure of the second tenor, Mr. Bell, who is the only character who speaks up for Mrs. Kearney. It could be that he is merely grateful for Kathleen's decisiveness in leading him out on the stage for the first part of the concert. But he stands in the corner with the Kearney family during the interval, and when appealed to for his opinion admits "he thought [Kathleen] had not been well treated"

(148). Joyce himself was a second tenor, and like Mr. Bell, was once awarded a bronze medal at the Feis Ceoil. The details of the actual concert that Joyce used as a basis for "A Mother" are of interest in this connection.

The concert given on August 27, 1904, in the Antient Concert Rooms featured John McCormack and J. C. Doyle, two well known singers, as well as a relatively inexperienced young singer named James Joyce. Richard Ellmann describes the concert as "the high point of [Joyce's] musical career" (JJI 168), and notes that Joyce was nervous (like Mr. Bell), in part because of the prestige of his fellow performers and in part due to the presence of Nora Barnacle in the audience. And like Mr. Bell, Joyce's nerves were further agitated by the problematic organization of the concert. The diary entry of a Dubliner, Joseph Holloway, provides a description:

the management of the entertainment could not have been worse. The Irish Revivalists are sadly in need of a capable manager. At present they invariably begin considerably after the time advertised and make the audience impatient; thus they handicap the performers unwarrantably. . . . The attendants at the door allowed people to come in noisily during the times to the distraction and annoyance of all attentive listeners. . . . The substitute appointed as accompanist in place of Miss Eileen Reidy, who left early in the evening, was so incompetent that one of the vocalists, Mr. James A. Joyce, had to sit down at the piano and accompany himself.²³

Holloway naturally assumed that the delays in the concert were merely another symptom of the disorganization of the Irish Revivalists, and we have no way of knowing if an incident similar to that in "A Mother" actually occurred backstage. Ellmann interviewed Eileen Reidy while preparing his biography of Joyce, yet evidently never asked her why she had to leave the concert early. But he did find out that Joyce had rehearsed with her in her home and when offered refreshment, instead of giving the expected re-

ply of "coffee" or "tea," Joyce asked for "whisky" (JJI 168). Although Mr. Holohan and Miss Healy turn their backs on those who once offered them hospitality, Joyce, as regards the fictional incarnation of Miss Reidy, apparently did not. The correspondences between Joyce and Mr. Bell are too pointed to be ignored; Mr. Bell seems to be a clue, playfully dropped, as to whose side Joyce is on.

"A Mother" is a story that must be read with careful attention to all such possible clues, for its simple surface purposely deceives. The placid narrative voice provides few obvious indications of how to "read" the various characters and events in the story, leaving it up to the reader to choose which "side" to be on. And the comic touches ensure that the reader will be disoriented when the story becomes confrontational and angry. Ironically, so many critics, while concentrating on what they believe are Joyce's intentions in the story, have unwittingly fallen into his trap. Neither understanding nor appreciating the very real grounds for Mrs. Kearney's anger, they can only see that she is stepping beyond the social norms of acceptable conduct for a "lady," and, mimicking the action of the story, they censure and dismiss her. It is easy to be seduced by the crowd when faced with the "unbending" Mrs. Kearney, but in the end, those readers who approve of her defeat ally themselves with the stiflingly conformist Dublin society that Joyce wished to indict in *Dubliners*.

NOTES

1. The critical essays referred to in my paper and in the notes represent the bulk of articles written solely about "A Mother." A survey of indices of various studies of Joyce, studies of *Dubliners* in particular, and collections of critical articles will testify to the relative paucity of even passing references to the story. As a side note (but perhaps one indicative of the general neglect of the story), the index of the revised edition of Richard Ellmann's biography of Joyce fails to note at least two interesting references to "A Mother" contained within the text.
2. Warren Beck, *Joyce's "Dubliners": Substance, Vision, and Art* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1969), p. 259. Subsequent references to this work are cited parenthetically in the text.