The Boarding House

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JAMES JOYCE

Born in Rathgar, a village just outside central Dublin, James Augustine Aloysius Joyce was the eldest of 10 surviving children of a Catholic family. The family was prosperous for a while, and Joyce was sent to a prestigious boarding school, but he was withdrawn when his father's drinking and financial carelessness drove the family to poverty. Nevertheless, Joyce went on to excel at a local Jesuit school and then studied languages, literature, and theater at University College, Dublin. After graduating, he moved to Paris with ideas of becoming a doctor, though he soon abandoned this plan in favor of literary pursuits. He returned to Dublin in 1903 because his mother was dying, but in late 1904, he set off for mainland Europe again, this time with his new partner, Nora Barnacle. The couple lived first in Austria-Hungary, and then in Trieste, Italy, where their two children were born. Joyce's first book, *Dubliners*, was published in 1914, though Joyce had been writing the short stories it contained for a decade. Between 1914 and 1919, Joyce and his family lived in Zurich, having left Italy when the First World War broke out. In 1916, Joyce published his first novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Over the following years, the family would live in Trieste, Paris, and Zurich, while Joyce worked on and published his novels *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939), which established him as one of the world's foremost avant-garde writers. He died in Zurich in 1941 at the age of 58, suffering from a perforated ulcer. Though Joyce had denounced the Catholic Church as a young man, many critics have observed that a Catholic spirit infuses much of his work.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When Joyce was writing *Dubliners* at the beginning of the 20th century, Ireland was part of the United Kingdom, ruled from London by the UK Parliament. The Joyce family, particularly Joyce and his father, were supporters of Irish Home Rule, a campaign for Ireland to govern itself, as championed by the Irish political leader Charles Stewart Parnell. Parnell's disgrace in 1889 and death in 1891 were serious blows to the cause of Irish nationalism and to the Joyce family. Over the decades that followed, Ireland became increasingly divided among Catholics and Protestants, Nationalists (who supported self-rule for Ireland) and Conservatives/Unionists (who wanted to stay in the United Kingdom). *Dubliners* is, among other things, a portrait of a city ruled by these increasingly rigid cultural and political classifications.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Dubliners, the collection in which "The Boarding House" appears, was Joyce's first and most naturalist work. In his later novels, such as *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce would pioneer a boldly experimental style, often using stream-of-consciousness narration, much like his contemporaries Virginia Woolf (in books such as *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*) and William Faulkner (in *The Sound and The Fury*, among other works). Written when the author was a young man, *Dubliners* bears the imprint of Joyce's early literary hero, the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. In works such as *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*, as well as the later *When We Dead Awaken* (which Joyce reviewed for an English periodical), Ibsen caused outrage by writing the uncompromising truth about normal lives, often peering beneath the façade of social niceties—a tack Joyce used masterfully in *Dubliners*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "The Boarding House"
- **When Written:** May and June 1905
- **Where Written:** Trieste, Italy
- **When Published:** 1914
- **Literary Period:** Modernist fiction
- **Genre:** Short Story, Naturalist Fiction, Modernist Fiction
- **Setting:** A boarding house in Dublin, Ireland
- **Climax:** The cunning Mrs. Mooney demands to talk to her lodger Mr. Doran after observing his covert fling with her daughter Polly.
- **Antagonist:** The restrictive social, religious, and gender-based mores of Dublin society.
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Farming Failure. In 1904, James Joyce was offered one pound per short story by the editor of a farming magazine. He published three stories under the pen name Stephen Dedalus, before being informed that they weren't what the magazine was looking for. Those stories—"The Sisters," "Eveline," and "After the Race"—were the first stories written for the collection that would become *Dubliners*.

Joyce and Jung. James Joyce's daughter Lucia suffered from schizophrenia and was a patient of one of the founding fathers of psychoanalysis, Carl Jung. Jung believed that both Lucia and her father were schizophrenic, but that James Joyce's literary genius enabled him to keep functioning.

PLOT SUMMARY

"The Boarding House" is a story about the fallout from an affair between a young woman, Polly, and a man, Mr. Doran, in early 20th-century Dublin. Mr. Doran is a lodger in the boarding house run by Polly's formidable mother, Mrs. Mooney.

Mrs. Mooney was once married to a drinker who tried to attack her with a **meat cleaver** one night. After that, Mrs. Mooney got permission from the priest to separate from her husband (since divorce was still not legal in Ireland at the time). With the money she took from the marriage, Mrs. Mooney set up a boarding house, where her lodgers are mostly clerks, as well as touring musical performers who inhabit the fringes of respectable society. Her lodgers refer to her as "The Madam."

Mrs. Mooney's two children also live at the boarding house: her son, Jack, a clerk who's prone to fighting and betting, and her daughter, Polly, a pretty and flirtatious girl of 19. Mrs. Mooney had sent Polly to work as a typist for a corn trader but brought her home again when her father kept bothering her at work. At the boarding house, Mrs. Mooney deliberately turns a blind eye on Polly's flirtations with the lodgers, even when one flirtation seems to go farther, developing into a secret relationship.

When she's sure that the relationship has progressed too far for the man to back out, Mrs. Mooney decides to intervene, first by having a frank conversation with Polly to see how far things have gone. The next morning, a sunny Sunday, she sits alone in her breakfast room and contemplates the conversation she plans to have with Mr. Doran. She is determined to secure a marriage proposal for Polly, and she feels confident she'll succeed. She knows that Mr. Doran has a good salary and some money put aside, and she feels satisfied with herself.

Meanwhile, Mr. Doran is in his bedroom, very anxious at the prospect of this conversation. He is shaking too much to shave, in agony every time he remembers confessing the affair to the priest the night before. He isn't sure whether he loves or even likes Polly, and he feels his family would look down on her, but he's terrified by the prospect of losing his job or his reputation if word of the relationship gets out.

While Mr. Doran agonizes, Polly comes to his bedroom door and tells him she has told her mother all about their affair. She seems distraught, and he comforts her, and he remembers the temptations that led him to this point: her waiting up to serve him dinner and punch, and coming to his bedroom door late one night to relight her candle.

The servant, Mary, comes to fetch Mr. Doran to speak to Mrs. Mooney. Mr. Doran leaves Polly crying on the bed, and on the way down the stairs he imagines his disapproving employer again, while also passing Jack Mooney, and remembering how he'd threatened violence upon another lodger for a perceived sexual comment about Polly.

In the bedroom, Polly wipes away her tears and slips into happy daydreams, totally unperturbed. Soon Mrs. Mooney calls her downstairs, saying that Mr. Doran would like to talk to her.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Mrs. Mooney – The protagonist of the story, Mrs. Mooney is Polly's mother and the owner of the boarding house. She is a formidable woman with a scheme to marry her daughter off. As a butcher's daughter who separated from her alcoholic husband after he tried to attack her with a **meat cleaver**, Mrs. Mooney has had to make her own way in life and be shrewd in order to survive as a single woman in 20th-century Ireland. This necessary cunning has nevertheless positioned her near the fringes of respectable society: her lodgers at the boarding house call her "the Madam," which is also the name for a female proprietor of a brothel. In her own, pragmatic way, Mrs. Mooney advocates for Polly by turning a blind eye on her flirtation with Mr. Doran, a resident of the boarding house, until she's sure she'll be able to secure a marriage proposal from him. Though, with her shrewdness and cunning, Mrs. Mooney has found a way to manipulate the strict social rules that oppress so many characters in *Dubliners*, she's still not free of those rules: she can't divorce her estranged husband, because divorce was illegal in Ireland at the time, and it's the limited prospects for women that force her to work so hard to marry Polly off.

Mr. Doran – Mr. Doran is a lodger at Mrs. Mooney's boarding house who has an affair with Mrs. Mooney's daughter, Polly. In his mid-30s, Mr. Doran has held a steady job for 13 years working for a Catholic wine merchant. Despite "sowing his wild oats" (that is, having many sexual relationships) and flirting with atheist ideas as a young man, Mr. Doran has led a respectable life for several years now. As for many characters in Dubliners, respectability is extremely restrictive for Mr. Doran: he is terrified of his family and his employer finding out about his affair with Polly, and he is near-traumatized by the agony of confessing the relationship to the priest. He doesn't have strong or passionate feelings for Polly—he's not even sure he likes her—but he's so terrified of what Mrs. Mooney might do and of being exposed that by the story's end, the strong implication is that he has agreed to marry Polly.

Polly Mooney – Mrs. Mooney's 19-year-old daughter, who does housework around the boarding house. A "very lively" young woman, she flirts with all the resident young men. She seems to be the driving force behind her relationship with Mr. Doran, showing him little signs of care, then finally going to his room one night in her bathrobe, under the pretense of lighting her candle. In Mr. Doran's company, Polly seems distraught that her mother has discovered the relationship, even threatening to kill herself, but as soon as she's alone she escapes into cheerful hopes and visions of the future. Though Polly

manipulates Mr. Doran, she herself is a victim of a very restrictive society that offers her no real opportunity to leave the family home except through marriage.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Jack Mooney – Mrs. Mooney's son. He lives in the boarding house, works as clerk in Dublin, and is known for liking to fight, curse, and bet. His protective attitude toward his sister, Polly, strikes fear into Mr. Doran.

Mr. Mooney – Mrs. Mooney's estranged husband, who once tried to attack her with a **cleaver**.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

SOCIAL MANIPULATION VS. SOCIAL PARALYSIS

"The Boarding House" depicts the consequences of an affair between a man and a young woman in early 20th-century Dublin. The flirtation between Mr. Doran and young Polly Mooney takes place in the house he boards in, run by Polly's mother, the formidable Mrs. Mooney. It's a suffocating environment that serves as a microcosm of Dublin, a city in which "everyone knows everyone else's business"—and judges that business according to strict social mores and religious morality. Like so many other characters in *Dubliners*, Mr. Doran is paralyzed by this scrutiny. Facing the judgment of his employer, the priest, his family, and others, he feels he has only two options: to marry Polly or to run away. Mrs. Mooney, meanwhile, takes advantage of this socially induced "paralysis" (to use Joyce's word from the first paragraph of *Dubliners*), by turning a blind eye on the flirtation until she's satisfied that it's gone too far for Mr. Doran to respectably back out. In this way, she uses rigid social rules to entrap Mr. Doran and marry off her daughter, who turns out to be a willing participant in the ruse. The strictures of Dublin society, then, create both paralysis and opportunities for manipulation. But though it seems Mrs. Mooney will get what she wants, and Polly is pleased with her mother's intervention, the story's biting tone clearly indicates that in Joyce's view, there is no real winner when people are ruled by the rigid, arbitrary forces of social and religious morality.

Though Mrs. Mooney is in some ways the story's victor, her victory is hollow. She is a great social manipulator (necessarily, after escaping her alcoholic husband who once tried to attack her with a **cleaver**), but the manipulation impoverishes her life. In considering her negotiation over Polly's future, Mrs. Mooney "was sure she would win. To begin with she had all the weight of social opinion on her side: she was an outraged mother." And yet she's not truly outraged, but rather scheming, even pleased about the affair. She "wins" only by acting a role, and so even while manipulating "social opinion," she still has to bend to it. And throughout the story, Mrs. Mooney concerns herself only with material gain. She considers Mr. Doran's "sit" (or job), his salary, and his savings, but not his character or her daughter's feelings. She clearly cares for her daughter, but she can express this care only through manipulation and fixation on material gain, thus suggesting that she, too, is trapped in her own way.

For Mr. Doran, the prospect of marriage holds only dread. The social strictures that paralyze Joyce's Dubliners seem to have claimed his whole life. As he descends the stairs to face Mrs. Mooney and discuss the affair, "the implacable faces of his employer and of the Madam [i.e., Mrs. Mooney] stared upon his discomfiture," and he passes Polly's brother, the brutish Jack, with a memory of his violence to someone who disrespected his sister. As such, his impending engagement seems to be sealed by the threats of unemployment, social scandal, and violence. The flirtation and lust between Mr. Doran and Polly Mooney are glossed over in just two paragraphs, while many pages are devoted to the inevitable outcome of this momentary outburst of libido. Thus the story's structure reflects a world in which libido—or life force more generally—is suffocated by social strictures. Even before he hears that Mrs. Mooney wishes to speak to him of the affair, Mr. Doran vividly hears and sees the ways everyone in his life might react to the information: "He felt his heart leap warmly in his throat as he heard in his excited imagination old Mr. Leonard [his employer] calling out in his rasping voice: *Send Mr. Doran here, please.*" And "he could imagine his friends talking of the affair and laughing." Thus even before his fate is sealed—while in a less claustrophobic world he might still be enjoying the "delirium" of the affair—he's tortured by social scrutiny.

Meanwhile, Polly's behavior is presented as mercenary, but necessarily so. In Mrs. Mooney's eagerness to marry Polly off, there's an implication that in Dublin society, it's necessary for a young girl like her to be married—seen, for instance, in the hardheaded phrasing "she thought of some mothers she knew who could not get their daughters off their hands." From here readers can deduce that women were under some pressure to marry, whether they wanted to or not. Polly seems to think little about Mr. Doran's characters or feelings, instead working in silent complicity with her mother to secure a proposal—but Joyce hints at the likely emptiness of such a match. Polly is cheery while Mr. Doran faces his fate with Mrs. Mooney: "She waited on patiently, almost cheerfully, without alarm, her memories gradually giving place to hopes and visions of the future. Her hopes and visions were so intricate that she no longer saw the white pillows on which her gaze was fixed or

remembered that she was waiting for anything." And yet to readers these hopes remain blank, casting an ominous air over the marriage. Joyce further foreshadows the emotional limits of Polly's marriage by presenting Mr. Doran's misgivings about her: "She *was* a little vulgar; sometimes she said *I seen* and *If I had've known*. But what would grammar matter if he really loved her?" Joyce clearly positions the match between Polly and Mr. Doran as an ultimately joyless, loveless one based on the "delirium" of early infatuation—"but delirium passes." As such, Polly will also lose out, no matter how happy she is with the way this story ends. Thus, while all three main characters dance with and around the rules of their society, Joyce demonstrates that each one is, in fact, paralyzed or impoverished by those very rules.

FEMALE INNOCENCE VS. FEMALE CUNNING

Though the story's male characters-Jack Mooney and Mr. Doran—see Polly as innocent and in need of protection, both Mrs. Mooney and her daughter in fact turn out to be the story's most skilled social navigators. Together, they wordlessly and intuitively collaborate on a successful bid to secure a proposal from Mr. Doran. Their cunning lies precisely in impersonating female innocence to achieve their own ends. And yet, though they're presented as manipulative, and though Joyce's portrayal of female characters has often been considered misogynistic, these female characters are in fact simply wily products of Dublin society—a society that scorns single women, leaves them few opportunities to support themselves, and is riddled with religious guilt and repression around sex, which women bear the brunt of in the form of harsh treatment for any sexual indiscretion. Thus, it's not the women Joyce condemns, or even their manipulations, but rather the need for women to manipulate in order to make their way in early 20th-century Dublin.

Mrs. Mooney's machinations are presented as natural and even necessary results of her life and struggles. She had to leave her alcoholic butcher husband when he "went for [her] with the **cleaver** one night." Now, she deals "with moral problems as a cleaver deals with meat." The repeated symbolism of the cleaver here indicates that when her husband failed her, Mrs. Mooney had no choice but to become the protector of her own family, which in this story means manipulating Mr. Doran into proposing, so that her daughter will be taken care of. As a single woman and business owner, Mrs. Mooney has to be careful with her resources. This constant accounting causes her to see Polly's marriage as just another business matter, as emphasized by the listing of Polly's future as just another item she must keep under lock and key: "When the table was cleared, the broken bread collected, the sugar and butter safe under lock and key, she began to reconstruct the interview which she had had the night before with Polly."

Mrs. Mooney's determination to see her daughter "married off" results from the pitiful options for young women at the time: unmarried women were either the subject of scandal (if they were known to have had love affairs), or a burden to their families (since in early 20th-century Dublin, there were few opportunities for women to make their own money). If she's to avoid being a burden, Polly's options are to find work or get married, but employment opportunities are scarce. She was previously employed outside of the household, but Mrs. Mooney withdrew her from the post when her "disreputable" father kept dropping in. But when Mrs. Mooney suspects Polly might not find a husband at the boarding house, she "began to think of sending Polly back to typewriting"—the very profession she'd removed her from previously. Thus, there seems to be only one possible job for a young woman, and Polly has already been removed from it. Meanwhile, romance is treacherous, and Mrs. Mooney is well aware of how harshly unmarried young women of the day can be judged for any sexual involvement: "It is all very well for the man: he can go his ways as if nothing had happened, having had his moment of pleasure, but the girl has to bear the brunt."

For Mrs. Mooney and Polly, the only way to achieve a decent future for Polly is to impersonate the naivete expected of women—thus cementing the patronizing social structure that imprisons them. Polly exclaims to Mr. Doran, "O, Bob! Bob! What am I to do? What am I to do at all?" and even threatens to "put an end to herself." And yet as soon as Mr. Doran leaves, she's entirely calm, having clearly known what she was doing all along. It seems that Polly must act the fool in order to get what she wants, and submit to being entirely underestimated by the man she will marry, though she is far wilier than him. (The irony of Polly's "What am I to do?" is heightened by prompt repetition in Mr. Doran's voice—though when Mr. Doran asks "What am I to do?" he isn't acting a part; he's truly in despair.) Even the relationship between mother and daughter is damaged by the need to feign innocence. When they discuss Polly's relations with Mr. Doran, "Both had been somewhat awkward, of course"—and both are awkward because they don't wish to reveal that they were anything but innocent in the affair's development.

Thus women control all the story's events, yet are still condescended to by the story's men. Mr. Doran is attracted to Polly's "white instep" (notable since white is a common symbol of virginity) and the way "the blood glowed warmly behind her perfumed skin"—an image of perfect purity. Later, he remembers appreciating her "thoughtfulness" in warming up his dinner and leaving tumblers of punch for him on late nights. Yet all the while, Polly is "patiently" and "cheerfully" working in pursuit of her own "hopes and visions." Meanwhile, other residents of the house "began to talk of the affair"—and talk of this kind is generally meant to punish or correct poor behavior. But Mrs. Mooney resists caving to the socially corrective force

of scandal until "she judged it to be the right moment" to take advantage of the scandal. As such, Mrs. Mooney, like Polly—and by extension like all the women in this city of which the boarding house is a microcosm—cunningly twists society's expectations of women to her own advantage, though doing so provides no escape from those expectations.

RELIGION, GUILT, AND SIN

James Joyce was raised a Roman Catholic but left the church as a young man, objecting to Catholicism's oppression of individuality and the overall effect this had on Irish society. "The Boarding House" offers a scathing critique of religion in Dublin, presenting it as, by turns, a prison (its machinery of guilt and sin trapping Mr. Doran in marriage) and a charade (as demonstrated by the worshippers in the "little circus" in front of the church outside the boarding house). In depicting Christianity as both performative and imprisoning, Joyce suggests that such a debased but socially powerful form of religion is incompatible with human happiness.

Religion is ever-present in "The Boarding House" as a controlling force, though empty of any healing, redemptive, or holy qualities. The sacred bond of marriage—one of the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church—becomes a highly unsacred battleground. It's degraded to a legal and economic bargaining tool by Mrs. Mooney's mercenary machinations to force Mr. Doran to propose as a "reparation" for his sexual sins with Polly. Meanwhile, outside the Protestant church opposite the boarding house, "worshippers, singly or in groups, traversed the little circus before the church, revealing their purpose by their self-contained demeanor no less than by the little volumes in their gloved hands." Their self-containment, their grip on material and worldly items like bound volumes, and the way they traverse a "circus" all highlight how debased and lacking in transcendence religion has become in this city.

In the case of Mr. Doran, religion is actively harmful, promoting a profound guilt about sin that causes him emotional and physical suffering and forces him into a life he doesn't want. After telling the priest about his affair with Polly, Mr. Doran's "recollection of his confession of the night before was a cause of acute pain to him." He's left so anxious he can't shave for shaking, so guilty he's "almost thankful at being afforded a loophole of reparation"—though that "loophole" is nothing less than being committed for life to a marriage he doesn't want. Moreover, there's a suggestion that Mr. Doran (like so many characters in *Dubliners*) had a more rebellious spirit in his youth, and that this has since been stamped out of him by religious duty—and a suggestion, too, that those days of youthful freedom from religious constraint might turn out to the happiest in his life: "As a young man he had sown his wild oats, of course; he had boasted of his free-thinking and denied the existence of God to his companions in public-houses. But that was all passed and done with … nearly. […] he attended to his religious duties and for nine-tenths of the year lived a regular life." And now precisely because of his attempts to live a regular, Church-sanctioned life, he feels like a man condemned.

Beyond oppressive and harmful, religion is presented as itself immoral or at least amoral, thus setting the tone for all the manipulation, posturing, and hypocrisy in the boarding house and the city as a whole. During Mr. Doran's confession, the priest drew out "every ridiculous detail of the affair." The ridiculousness of the details highlights that knowing them wasn't necessary to the priest's task; he might have been acting out some improper interest in sexual matters. Mrs. Mooney, meanwhile, hopes that after "hav[ing] the matter out with Mr. Doran," she'll be able to "catch short twelve at Marlborough Street"—that is, go to the shortest Mass available, favored by people recovering from Saturday night. So debased is this religion, Joyce suggests, that it can be squeezed in between life's manipulations and excesses without a second thought. In Joyce's Dublin, then, religion is a dangerous of thing: an oppressively powerful governing force with no true morality.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

CLEAVER

In "The Boarding House," the cleaver—a large knife butchers use to cut bone—symbolizes the forceful and decisive power of social oppression. Mrs. Mooney, a butcher's daughter who would have grown up around cleavers, left her alcoholic husband after he "went for [her] with the cleaver" one night. Here, the cleaver symbolizes the ways in which Dublin's patriarchal society oppressed and even terrorized women in early 20th-century Dublin. Later, as a single mother and businesswoman, Mrs. Mooney learns to manipulate society's oppressive rules for her own gain, and deals with moral problems—like Polly and Mr. Doran's relationship—"as a cleaver deals with meat."

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *Dubliners* published in 1993.

The Boarding House Quotes

❝ Mrs. Mooney was a butcher's daughter. She was a woman who was quite able to keep things to herself: a determined woman.

Related Characters: Mrs. Mooney

Related Themes:

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

The opening sentences of "The Boarding House" paint a deft picture of Mrs. Mooney and the society she lives in. By identifying her first as a butcher's daughter, Joyce highlights that as a woman in early 20th-century Dublin, Mrs. Mooney's identity and social position are dictated and defined by the men in her life. However, in the next sentence, he indicates that for a certain kind of woman—determined women like Mrs. Mooney—there remains some freedom to maneuver, even within this restrictive, patriarchal society.

Joyce has sometimes been accused of misogyny, and Mrs. Mooney and Polly are often held up as examples of his manipulative and unsympathetic female characters. However, these opening sentences subtly point to the true object of Joyce's scorn: social restrictions and conventions, which deaden life by keeping everyone in their place. Indeed, the story's entire first paragraph, in which Joyce details Mr. Mooney's alcoholism and attempted cleaver attack on Mrs. Mooney, further suggest that Joyce empathized with the plight of women in this society, and understood that a degree of manipulation of social rules was often necessary for their survival. Seen in this light, the description of Mrs. Mooney as "determined" might even be read as admiring.

> She governed her house cunningly and firmly, knew when to give credit, when to be stern and when to let things pass. All the resident young men spoke of her as *The Madam*.

Related Characters: Mrs. Mooney

Related Themes:

Page Number: 56–57

Explanation and Analysis

Having left her alcoholic husband and established her own business, Mrs. Mooney proves herself to be a shrewd businesswoman. Dublin in the early 20th century was a city of many rules and moral codes—the kind of rules that often caused paralysis, a theme Joyce establishes in the very first paragraph of *Dubliners*.

As a separated woman and single mother, Mrs. Mooney has contravened several rules of social propriety. A lesser character might have been paralyzed by finding themselves on the wrong side of society's judgments, but the determined Mrs. Mooney instead establishes herself as a "governor" of social rules rather than a follower. Her boarding house serves as a microcosm of Dublin, and as its governor, Mrs. Mooney is free to give credit or turn a blind eye on bad behavior as she sees fit. However, by refusing to be subservient to society's rules, she positions herself on the outskirts of respectability, as reflected in her nickname, "The Madam," which is also the name for a female proprietor of a brothel. So while Mrs. Mooney does successfully sidestep some social mores and carve out a life for herself as a single woman in 20th-century Dublin, her decision to do so is not without consequence.

> At last, when she judged it to be the right moment, Mrs. Mooney intervened. She dealt with moral problems as a cleaver deals with meat: and in this case she had made up her mind.

Related Characters: Mrs. Mooney

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Mooney has been watching the flirtation between Polly and Mr. Doran develop, not wanting to intervene until she believes it would be too late for Mr. Doran to respectably walk away from Polly, thus securing Polly a husband. She has allowed the flirtation to continue even amid gossip in the boarding house, and judges it the right moment to intervene only when Polly and Mr. Doran begin to act strangely.

At the simplest level, the image of the meat cleaver illustrates Mrs. Mooney's decisiveness—her decisions are firm enough to cut through meat and bone. On a deeper level, the image symbolizes her success in evading Dublin's paralyzing social rules. At the beginning of the story, readers learned that Mrs. Mooney left her alcoholic husband after he tried to attack her with a cleaver. Then, the cleaver symbolized the ways in which Mrs. Mooney herself was oppressed by Dublin society, specifically by a patriarchal social structure that restricted women's freedoms. Now,

Mrs. Mooney is the one wielding the cleaver. Having learned to manipulate society's rules in her own favor, she will use them to trap Mr. Doran in marriage—which is precisely the trap she herself escaped.

> The belfry of George's Church sent out constant peals and worshippers, singly or in groups, traversed the little circus before the church, revealing their purpose by their self-contained demeanour no less than by the little volumes in their gloved hands.

Related Characters: Mr. Doran, Polly Mooney, Mrs. Mooney

Related Themes:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mrs. Mooney sits in the breakfast room of her boarding house, preparing to talk to Mr. Doran and secure a marriage proposal for Polly. Through the window, she sees churchgoers on their way to a service. Dublin in the early 20th century was a highly religious city—in fact, religious mores are one of the main sources of the social paralysis Joyce rails against throughout *Dubliners*. And yet in Joyce's view, the Catholicism and Protestantism that ruled the city were debased and unworthy (this perspective is also evidenced by Joyce's decision to leave the Catholic Church as a young man).

Here, religion's pettiness and worldliness are underscored by the "little volumes in [the churchgoers'] gloved hands," in which the focus on gloves and books seems to limit religious faith to material props rather than meaningful spiritual beliefs. Meanwhile, the churchgoers' "self-contained demeanour" is very far from the transcendence one might expect from a profound religious experience. Similarly, the language of "traversing the little circus" recalls traveling circuses, a comparison that makes churchgoing seem trivial, even childish. The tragedy of the lives lost to social paralysis, such as Mr. Doran's, is greatly heightened by this vignette revealing the triviality and worldliness of the institutions enforcing the paralysis.

> She was sure she would win. To begin with she had all the weight of social opinion on her side: she was an outraged mother.

Related Characters: Mrs. Mooney

Related Themes:

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Mrs. Mooney sits in her breakfast room, contemplating the conversation she's about to have with Mr. Doran, in which she plans to secure a marriage proposal for Polly. The language of winning (and by extension losing) frames marriage as a battleground—a perspective Joyce highlights by repeating "she felt sure she would win" two paragraphs later. For Mrs. Mooney, the stakes in the battle are primarily financial: as a husband, Mr. Doran would provide for Polly, lifting that burden from Mrs. Mooney. This mercenary approach to marriage—one of the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church—highlights the debasement of religion in Joyce's Dublin.

Mrs. Mooney's main weapon in the battle is her ability to manipulate social mores to her advantage. She's not truly outraged—in fact, she's pleased with the bargaining power handed to her by Mr. Doran's and Polly's indiscretion. Yet playing the socially prescribed role of outraged mother gives her the upper hand in the battle. In one sense, she's triumphant compared to Joyce's other Dubliners, having learned to play the social rules that paralyze others. And yet she, too, is trapped in their web, forced to act out a role and to become a master manipulator simply in order to make her way, and to make way for her daughter, in a society where women have so few options.

> There must be reparation made in such cases. It is all very well for the man: he can go his way as if nothing had happened, having had his moment of pleasure, but the girl has to bear the brunt.

Related Characters: Mr. Doran, Polly Mooney, Mrs. Mooney

Related Themes:

Page Number: 59-60

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mrs. Mooney considers the conversation she's about to have with Mr. Doran, in which she plans to secure a marriage proposal for Polly. She reinforces her own determination to get a proposal by reminding herself of the

disproportionate ways women in her society are punished for any perceived sexual indiscretion.

"The Boarding House" presents a clear picture of the ways Dublin society could entrap and paralyze a man, in the form of Mr. Doran, while seeming to present women—Mrs. Mooney and Polly—as freer and more able to manipulate social rules. Yet here, Joyce indicates that if the story's women have learned to manipulate, it's only because society is even more restrictive for them than for men. Beyond being unpleasant to experience, "bearing the brunt" of the social shame for affairs would have further restricted the few options available to women, for instance by making possible husbands and even employers shun them.

In addition, the language of "reparation," more commonly applied in the context of war, emphasizes the story's presentation of marriage as a battlefield. This, in turn, highlights Joyce's theme of the debasement of religion, since marriage is one of the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church.

> Dublin is such a small city: everyone knows everyone else's business.

Related Characters: Mr. Doran

Related Themes:

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

In his bedroom at the boarding house, Mr. Doran experiences terrible anxiety and even acute pain, worrying about the consequences of his affair with Polly. He feels he has no choice but to marry her, since the whole city surely knows about the affair and to do anything else would cause a scandal and ruin his reputation. Through Mr. Doran's anxiety, Joyce emphasizes how 20th-century Dublin is a city in which personal freedom is entirely sacrificed to public opinion. Beyond knowing everyone's business, the city's residents often use that business against them, punitively. Having already endured the pain of confessing the affair to the priest—who was all too interested in the details of the affair—Mr. Doran considers his two options: the possibility of losing his job if he doesn't marry Polly and his employer inevitably finds out about the affair, and the disapproval and ridicule of his friends and family if he does marry her. There is no escape, and no good solution. Mr. Doran's situation is a classic example of paralysis.

Joyce also heightens the story's claustrophobic tone by setting it entirely within the walls of the boarding house. In this way, he turns the establishment into a microcosm of Dublin at large—a place in which everyone knows and judges others by their business. The result is a suffocating, deadening world in which people are not free to do as they wish.

> All his long years of service gone for nothing! All his industry and diligence thrown away! As a young man he had sown his wild oats, of course; he had boasted of his free-thinking and denied the existence of God to his companions in public-houses. But that was all passed and done with . . . nearly.

Related Characters: Mr. Doran

Related Themes:

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

In his bedroom, Mr. Doran anguishes over the prospect of losing his job and his place in respectable society over his relationship with Polly—unless he marries her. In his adult life, Mr. Doran has clearly applied himself to respectable living, and the words "service," "industry," and "diligence" indicate that this has taken effort; it's not necessarily his disposition. Joyce contrasts this heavy, adult way of life with the lightness of youth. In a story that dwells so heavily on the paralysis of adult life, the description of Mr. Doran's flash of youthful freedom, sowing his wild oats and boasting of his free-thinking, becomes a vivid picture of lost possibilities. There's a particular ironic freedom in Mr. Doran's youthful denial of the existence of God in light of his painful confession to the priest and religion's instrumental role in his current paralysis. There's also a tragic note in this quote's use of "of course," suggesting as it does the inevitability of every Dublin man's life trajectory, through a few years of unfettered freedom to the deadening duty of adult life.

> His instinct urged him to remain free, not to marry. Once you are married you are done for, it said.

Related Characters: Mr. Doran

Related Themes:

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

In his bedroom, Mr. Doran anguishes over his future. He is certain that his affair will be discussed all around Dublin, and that if he wants to keep his job and avoid a scandal, he will have to marry Polly. However, he doesn't love her, and he fears his family and friends' ridicule and disapproval if he does marry her.

Throughout this story, Mr. Doran's human instincts, though strongly suppressed, flicker to life in resistance to the restrictions of Dublin society. It was the instinct of lust, after all, that led him into his relationship with Polly. Now, his instinct for freedom flickers in opposition to the oppressive, conflicting social requirements he faces: to avoid scandal, to avoid the sin of an affair outside of marriage, and to avoid social condemnation for marrying below his class. By giving Mr. Doran's instinct its own voice with which to address him, Joyce suggests how powerful he believes such instincts to be. As independent entities, living within each human, they will forever rebel against social restrictions.

❝ She waited on patiently, almost cheerfully, without alarm, her memories gradually giving place to hopes and visions of the future. Her hopes and visions were so intricate that she no longer saw the white pillows on which her gaze was fixed or remembered that she was waiting for anything.

Related Characters: Polly Mooney

Related Themes:

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

Polly waits in Mr. Doran's bedroom after her mother has called him downstairs to discuss their affair and request that he propose to Polly. Clearly, she has been manipulating Mr. Doran: though she was distraught about their predicament in his presence, the misery passes as soon as he leaves.

Though Polly manipulates Mr. Doran, Joyce doesn't paint her as cruel. The white blankness of the pillows she stares at represent the blankness of her life: at 19, she's almost a child. And though she disappears into intricate hopes and visions, these are never shared with the reader, making them seem as blank as the pillows themselves. As a result, Polly comes across as more naïve than coldly calculating.

Ultimately, Polly is a young woman with youthful dreams, who is about to receive and, it seems, accept a wedding proposal from a man who doesn't love her and whom she doesn't respect enough to treat honestly. She's cheerful about this path because there are so few other options available to her as a young woman living in early 20th-century Dublin. Ultimately, Joyce's critique is aimed at the society that would entrap both Mr. Doran and Polly in such a situation.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE BOARDING HOUSE

The daughter of a butcher, Mrs. Mooney is a "determined woman" who opens a butcher shop with her husband. But soon, Mr. Mooney begins to lose control over his life, overindulging in alcohol, making poor business decisions, and racking up debt. On one particular night, Mrs. Mooney's husband tries to attack her with a **cleaver**, and from then on they live apart from one another.

Dublin in the early 20th century is presented as a traditional city in which children follow in their parents' footsteps and men hold the social and economic power. These social mores make the city a paralyzing and even dangerous space for women, in which men (including alcoholic, irresponsible men) can wield power and even weapons against them. Making one's own way as a woman in this city requires great determination, even cunning.

After Mrs. Mooney visits a local priest and secures a separation from her husband, Mr. Mooney is forced to take a lowly job in a debt-collection office. Mrs. Mooney uses her own money from the butcher business and establishes a boarding house. Her residents are mostly clerks, plus some touring performers in musical shows, all of whom call her "*The Madam*."

Mrs. Mooney recognizes Dublin's strict social rules but is prepared to live at their outer edges: divorce was still illegal in Dublin in the early 20th century, so she seeks a separation instead. And her boarding house has a dubious reputation: "The Madam" is also the name for a female proprietor of a brothel. Mrs. Mooney's willingness to push the limits of respectability seems to come from her determination to survive as a single woman and mother.

The boarding house is a lively place where the residents get along well and often socialize and hold musical gatherings in the common areas. It's also home to Mrs. Mooney's two adult children. Her son, Jack, likes to swear, fight, bet, and come home late at night.

Mrs. Mooney's daring attitude towards social propriety is further emphasized by the musical gatherings she allows in her house, since the touring musicians she lodges would have been on the outskirts of respectable society. And Jack's behavior implies that she's not strict about making her children observe the rules of polite Dublin society, either. The implication is that to Mrs. Mooney, the city's moral rules are worth following only when doing so is beneficial to oneself.

Mrs. Mooney's daughter, 19-year-old Polly, previously worked as a typist for a local corn trader, but her mother ended the employment when Mr. Mooney kept dropping in to see her. Instead, Mrs. Mooney has put her to work doing housework at the boarding house, intending to allow her as much contact as she wants with the resident young men.

Early 20th-century Dublin could be paralyzing for women: if they weren't wealthy by birth and they wished to avoid becoming a burden to their families, they could either marry or seek work outside of the house. However, job opportunities for women were few, and in Polly's case, her father ruins one of the few available options, indicating that men curtailed even the paltry freedoms women did have. When employment doesn't work out, Mrs. Mooney uses her social cunning to subtly facilitate the only other option for Polly: helping her to marry.

Under Mrs. Mooney's watchful eye, Polly flirts with the boarding house's residents. When none of the flirtation progresses into anything more, Mrs. Mooney considers sending Polly back to work as a typist—until she notices a closeness developing between Polly and a lodger named Mr. Doran.

By silently allowing and even (wordlessly) encouraging Polly to flirt with the boarders, hoping to get something in exchange for her daughter's affections, Mrs. Mooney seems to live up to her nickname, "The Madam," referring to the name for a female proprietor of a brothel. And yet she has little choice but to scheme for her daughter's future: the only other option is outside employment, which has already failed. The scarcity of options for young women is all too clear.

Mrs. Mooney silently watches the relationship develop. Polly knows her mother is observing her, but the two never discuss the affair. Though the other lodgers begin to gossip about Polly and Mr. Doran, Mrs. Mooney keeps quiet until she deems it the right time to deal with the situation, which she plans to do "as a **cleaver** deals with meat."

Mrs. Mooney uses Dublin's restrictive rules about social propriety in her own favor, allowing a scandal to grow around Polly and Mr. Doran because it will give her greater bargaining power against him and essentially trap him into marriage with Polly. Mrs. Mooney herself was once trapped in a marriage, her life endangered by a cleaver that seemed symbolic of her social oppression. Now, she's the one wielding the cleaver and entrapping Mr. Doran.

One bright Sunday morning, Mrs. Mooney sits alone in the boarding house's breakfast room, watching churchgoers "traverse the little circus before the church" across the street. She watches the servant clear the leftover breakfast food from the table and lock up the sugar and butter, then recalls the conversation she had with Polly the night before, in which she confirmed that her relationship with Mr. Doran had gone beyond flirtation.

"The circus" is an open space where several roads converge, yet the word also recalls traveling circuses, thus diminishing the church's gravity and suggesting that the city's strict morality is not rooted in genuine religious conviction but is instead foolish and performative. And in considering her conversation with Polly after making sure the sugar and butter have been locked away, Mrs. Mooney suggests that Polly is merely another commodity she must protect.

Now, Mrs. Mooney is planning to speak to Mr. Doran, before going to "catch short twelve," or attend a very short Mass, nearby. She reminds herself of the reasons society would condemn his behavior and "felt sure she would win." On winning, she plans to exact a "reparation" from Mr. Doran: marriage. She's determined to get a reparation because society scorns young women more than men after affairs.

Both religion and marriage are thoroughly debased in Joyce's Dublin. Marriage is one of the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church, but Mrs. Mooney reduces it to a military battleground in which one can "win" or "lose" and "reparations" must be paid. Furthermore, she hopes to squeeze in Mass after entrapping a man in this debased sacrament for economic reasons, thus seemingly cheapening the Mass and, by extension, all of religion.

Mrs. Mooney counts her playing cards and sends the servant to fetch Mr. Doran. While she waits, she considers his good job and serious character, and the gossip about the affair in the boarding house, and reassures herself that "she would win" because he will want to avoid a scandal. Finally, she stands up and takes a satisfied look at herself in the mirror, thinking of other mothers who "could not get their daughters off their hands."

For Mrs. Mooney, the most important considerations in seeking a husband for her daughter are his financial and social stability, as well as how effectively she can manipulate him. Though she is satisfied with herself, and though she has played Dublin's social rules to her own advantage, she is paralyzed in her own way, her own life diminished by this society's restrictions, as demonstrated by the loveless language of mothers trying to "get their daughters off their hands."


Meanwhile, Mr. Doran is in his bedroom, so anxious that his hand is shaking too much to shave. He suffers acute pain every time he remembers confessing his affair with Polly to the priest the previous night, and the way the priest "had drawn out every ridiculous detail of the affair." The confession was so agonizing that he was relieved to be offered "a loophole of reparation" in the form of marriage.

Mr. Doran's angst illustrates the terror of sin that tyrannized so many Dubliners—a terror that runs throughout Dubliners. *It's a terror so acute that, by comparison, the lifelong bond of marriage seems like a fortunate loophole for avoiding sin. And yet Joyce presents the Church—the institution that enforces this terror—as morally questionable. By insisting on hearing the "ridiculous" details of the affair, the priest comes across as more salacious than holy.*


Mr. Doran goes on to imagine his employer finding out about his affair with Polly, which could result in him losing his job. He feels that after growing out of some "free-thinking" in his youth, he has worked hard at living a respectable life—but now he's thrown those efforts away, leaving himself no choice but to marry Polly.

Dubliners who transgressed the city's strict morality didn't just risk condemnation from the Church—they could fall into poverty after losing their jobs. In Dubliners *as a whole, this vice-like social control paralyzes people and strangles the human instincts for freedom (including "free-thinking") and passion, forcing men and women to lead empty but respectable lives.*

Mr. Doran is ashamed of his own indiscretion and also a little of Polly herself. He anticipates his family looking down on her because of her disreputable parents, and his friends laughing about the affair. He's ashamed of Polly's poor grammar and what he sees as her mild vulgarity. He can't decide whether she's to blame for trapping him, but he does know that his instinct is urging him not to marry.

Beyond the threat of poverty and sin, Dubliners were paralyzed by the possibility of social ridicule. Coming from a lower social class, Polly might well inspire this kind of ridicule among Mr. Doran's circles. And yet even as he contemplates all these sources of social paralysis, some instinct in Mr. Doran urges him not to sacrifice his last remaining freedom: his unmarried status.

Polly comes to Mr. Doran's bedroom, crying, and explains that she's told her mother everything. She's distraught and even threatens to kill herself. Mr. Doran tries to comfort her, and he remembers some of the temptations that drew him to her, such as the pure white skin of her foot's instep. He recalls all the delirium of their early flirtation, then remembers that "delirium passes."

Polly plays the part of a helpless woman—an effective way of manipulating Mr. Doran. Now and during their flirtation and sexual entanglement, Polly led Mr. Doran to believe in her innocence, as symbolized by the purity of her white skin. And yet having witnessed Polly's calmness while talking to her mother earlier, readers know that Polly is far from naïve.

The servant knocks on the door to tell Mr. Doran that Mrs. Mooney would like to speak to him downstairs. Mr. Doran comforts Polly one last time and then goes downstairs, terrified. As he descends, he pictures his employer's face, and Mrs. Mooney's, then passes the brutish Jack and remembers how enraged he was one night, when he thought a lodger at the boarding house "had made a rather free allusion to Polly."

As he goes to meet his fate, Mr. Doran is again tortured by his social paralysis and all that might happen to him if the scandal emerges: the loss of his job and even physical violence. Meanwhile, his memory of brutish behavior toward another lodger indicates that, like Mr. Doran, Jack believes Polly to be innocent and in need of protection.

In the bedroom, Polly's tears dry very quickly, and she soon seems quite calm. She waits "patiently, almost cheerfully," disappearing into intricate (though unspecified) hopes and visions of the future until her mother calls her downstairs, saying, "Mr. Doran wants to speak to you."

Polly has cunningly used the stereotype of the helpless woman to her advantage in manipulating Mr. Doran, and now sits happily awaiting the fruits of her labor: a marriage proposal. And yet even as the victor in this social manipulation, Polly, too, is diminished by the restrictions of Dublin society. Her visions of the future are intricate but remain blank to readers, suggesting that she's entering a life she's unprepared for.

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