I

'Clay' is a unique case of storytelling where the title plays a far greater role than it commonly does. How many readers, at first reading, would be able to grasp what is meant by 'a soft wet substance' (Dubliners, 117: hereafter page numbers alone) related with the garden and promptly thrown out there? Even with the assistance of the explicit 'Clay', quite a few will remain perplexed about the inadequacy of the initial choice that Maria, the heroine, makes in a fortune-telling game of saucers on Hallow Eve. Furthermore, she receives no explanation about what went wrong nor much instruction about why she has to play it again. Blindfolded and forgotten, she forlornly stands waiting in the midst of 'a pause for a few seconds' followed immediately by 'a great deal of scuffling and whispering' (117). Of all the people present there, the player is farthest removed from understanding the awkward situation of her own making, although her blindness to the reality certainly prevents her from facing moments of painful embarrassment. The topic of 'epiphany', one of the central themes that govern the entire collection of Dubliners, is addressed not to any of the characters but to the reader in the case of 'Clay'. It might be surmised in an oblique reading that Joyce chuckles over the integration of the heroine's plight into the reader's dismay about his intent in the title and game.

The whole scene pivots on a narrative design in which the title and the plot collaborate for mutual assistance and clarification. In fact, the former is an indispensable part of the latter: or rather, the latter is compelled to proceed under the eerie shadow of the former. In the critique of Dubliners, the word 'clay' is acknowledged to indicate 'soil' or 'dirt' in the context and implies death through its folkloric association with a graveyard or, perhaps, through its biblical connotation of 'returning to dust' (Jackson & McGinley, 94; Owens, 344). The Hallow Eve game sheds a revelatory light on the heroine, not only on what she is, but also on what she has been and what she will be. Her helpless figure, deprived temporarily of the ability of sight and speech, epitomizes the fundamental condition of being that has beleaguered her entire life. The two items she puts her hand on, clay and a prayer book, foreshadow the feasible paths which await her in the near future. More stern and bleak to her than the option of death or a life in a convent is the fact that
no second attempt is allowed in real life. Old age and the stifling milieu of Dublin stealthily encroach on her lack of insight and threaten to shift her course of life drastically while her inveterate optimism leads her into a gross misconception about her long-gone youth and eligibility for nuptials.

As in the game, Maria is habitually placed at the mercy of people around her, condescending to accept the modes of life found, shaped and determined by them and keeping her own wishes and desires to herself. Only to the mirror does she reveal her body and inner landscape as well. Her ability to see is ever stunted and further suppressed in the presence of others, especially when she is put under their close observation. ‘Being blindfolded’ is actually a physical metaphor for what she inwardly is: it is synonymous with ignorance and immaturity, with a failure to grow up and confront reality no matter how sordid it might be. In the same vein, mention should be made of her appearance with ‘a very long nose and a very long chin’ (110). When she laughs, the tip of her nose nearly meets the tip of her chin, and she suddenly and inadvertently bears an uncanny resemblance to a witch. The facial expression of joy and hilarity betrays naughtiness and even vexatiousness hidden deep inside this innocent woman. What makes ‘Clay’ an impressive story and its heroine someone unforgettable is the peculiar act of balance played out by the combination of lucidity and haziness in the plot, and perversity and spiritual purity in Maria. The greatest problem that faces her in the story is that she has neither any knowledge of her own self nor any control over her own life and that things go on regardless of her wishes, intentions and abilities.

According to Don Gifford (77), “Clay” is the fourth story in order of composition, completed in January 1905 and slightly revised in the following year. It is placed third in the section of ‘Maturity’ and tenth in the entire collection. ‘Clay’ is one of the few stories in Dubliners that have a woman for the main character: of the fifteen stories, merely ‘Eveline’, ‘The Boarding House’ and ‘A Mother’ fall in the same category. Like most of the tales in Dubliners, ‘Clay’ sketches a small excursion carried out by Maria across Dublin. On All Hallows’ Eve, Maria traverses the city centre from Ballsbridge to Drumcondra. Again like the other stories, ‘Clay’ abruptly comes to an end in the middle of the action and remains strictly mum about the heroine’s return trip and her life beyond as a whole. What is left untold is far greater than what is narrated, and the author leaves no clue about it. The massive blank has to be filled by the reader’s perception and imagination: it is in this sense that Dubliners is a challenging piece of fiction, although it deals with only fifteen petty slices of ordinary life in Dublin around the turn of the twentieth century.

The narrative framework of ‘Clay’ is comprised of deceptively simple elements - an ageing heroine and her visit to her own family or the family of her old acquaintance. The tale covers the
duration of some hours from evening to night-time and the distance between two different locations from a laundry shop called 'Dublin by Lamplight' to the house of Joe Donnelly's family. Inserted in the middle are Maria's two tram rides and shopping at two cake shops. The tripartite structure in terms of time and place has bearing on the different dimensions of Maria's persona, which in their turn call for separate analysis and interpretation. This study intends to dissect the character of Maria in the three different stages of 'Clay' and reconstruct its entirety by putting together verbal sketches of her virtues and vices, of her joys and sorrows.

II

Discussion of details might be preceded by a general survey of the whole. 'Clay' fastidiously keeps its thematic core obscure in the delineation of humdrum events in Maria's life. This evasiveness is linked with her mindset and the ethos of Dublin. The third-person narration is conducted by the author in the role of an anonymous narrator, whose voice and level of observation stay close to the heroine's murky view of the world and rarely go beneath the surface. This technical stance necessitates the reader to strive to get acquainted with the real state of affairs and the real person of Maria. To help to lighten the daunting task, the narrator drops occasional hints and insinuations on what lurks behind the reality. The heroine, too, though very rarely, lays bare her feelings and emotions through glances, blushes and inner monologues. 'Clay' is, as it were, a nebulous tale whose narrative contour and meaning are adumbrated by the way these bits and pieces are made out in accordance with the context and theme.

'Clay' abounds in antitheses. The interplay of opposite views and visions provides a driving force for the plot. Critical commentaries of the tale have discovered the contrasting images of a saint and a witch, a Virgin-Mary figure and a troublemaker, for Maria, as is conveniently reviewed and outlined by Florence Walzl (107-109). What remains to be done is elucidation of the literary purposes and effects of such contradictory ideas in relation to the characterization and storyline. The first section of 'Clay', which takes place exclusively at the laundry, offers a glimpse of Maria's daily life together with the washerwomen euphemistically dubbed 'common women' (110). Maria herself is perhaps a live-in scullion, something of a slavey as was known in Joyce's days. She is praised as 'a veritable peace-maker' (110) by the 'matron', the supervising figure of the shop. The compliment is delivered on a personal basis, but it more or less becomes a communal message for the entire shop when overheard by 'the sub-matron and two of the Board-ladies' (110). The epithet 'peace-maker', illuminated by the powerful modifier, is a credential respectable enough for a soft-spoken old maid, but it is destined to be short-lived. The rest of the tale reacts quickly to negate it
Maria keeps the kitchen in a perfect condition, or 'spick and span' in a Joycean alliterative phrase. She also cuts Halloween dinner bread into meticulously even slices like magic, without a visible trace. This ability is further enhanced by a series of free indirect speeches in which, equally with peculiar caution and zeal, she evenly divides her itinerary for the evening:

... to get away before seven. From Ballsbridge to the Pillar, twenty minutes; from the pillar to Drumcondra, twenty minutes; and twenty minutes to buy the things. She would be there before eight. (110)

The heroine's salient inclination to precision and cautiousness is also retained in her private domain of life. Alone in her own room, she this time peruses her schedule for the following morning and moves the hand of her alarm clock from seven o'clock to six for the morning Mass of All Saints' Day. Then she prepares herself for her nocturnal outing by arranging all the clothes in order on the bed. Her Sunday best reminds her of the old days when she was a little girl and indulges her into a narcissistic act of looking adoringly at the reflection of her own diminutive body on the mirror. Nostalgia bridges the enormous chasm of time and revives the naïve sentimentality of an adolescent girl in the heroine's aged body, which is never armed with a mature woman's sensibility.

Then she puts on the clothes and boots which are as tiny as children's and, at the last moment, adds 'her old brown waterproof' (113) on second thought. The colour of the coat assimilates her perfectly into the scenery and milieu of 'dear, dirty Dublin' ('A Little Cloud', 83), which Joyce persistently draws in brown, and sets her on to encounter a gentleman with 'a brown hard hat' (114). The heroine's change of clothes marks the beginning of her transformation from the Maria of the day into the Maria of the night, from the nervous Maria into the naughty Maria. The shift of identities accords well with the time of the year. Hallow Eve is the very night when Old and New years, summer and winter, death and birth, meet and mingle, when Celtic superstitions and Christian celebrations melt into cultural coherence. It is also the only night when the dead and spirits are welcomed to wander out of their confines, walk openly back in their former communities, and get together with the living (Owens, 338). The mythical setting stirs up the image of Maria as a living dead ready to embark on her return trip to the region of the quick.

What emerges out of these bits of illustration is a picture of an efficient, hard-working yet self-effacing woman who is well beloved for her sincerity and kindness and whose presence the laundry hardly dispenses with. Simply, 'Everyone was so fond of Maria' (110). Her current favourable condition contributes to her preference of independence to moving out of the shop in response to Joe's kind words of invitation and living with the Donellys. Her firm decision is expressed in 'She
... thought how much better it was to be independent and to have your own money in your pocket' (113). Like anything else that belongs to her, however, Maria's complacency and euphoria are soon to be terminated as the tale unfolds further.

It is unavoidable that a study of antitheses should wade through a mire of self-denial and self-contradiction by undermining what it has proposed. There is another story in 'Clay', a story related between the lines and in the margin of the pages, as Margot Norris shrewdly opines in her theoretically dense and pregnant study (91-93). Maria is simply an embodiment of contradictions that remains open to various analyses and interpretations. Her witch-like facial features and tiny body may convey the message of a clear lack of feminine charms, which might be ascribed partly to her unmarried status. The laundry shop that accommodates the Catholic heroine is a Protestant charitable institution set up for former prostitutes. In her younger days, Maria nursed Joe and Alphy, the former of whom claims with affection and gratitude, 'Mamma is Mamma, but Maria is my proper mother' (111). Then the three had to go through a 'break-up at home' (111), after which the boys arranged the placement among women of ill fame of the heroine, whose vicarious motherhood also diminished her chances for raising her own children. It is more than ironical that the brothers, who no longer see each other due to their mutual hostility, strenuously worked together in finding the Dublin by Lamplight laundry for their ageing surrogate mother. Since then, Maria's visitation to the Donnellys has become rare and seasonal.

Seen from this acerbic, down-to-earth angle, Maria's independence suddenly appears dubious and almost equivalent to alienation, disowning, and even abandonment. The statement that 'Joe's wife was ever so nice with her' (111) could be taken as valid on the premise that the current arrangement of separate residency, infrequent visitation and brief stay should be maintained. All in all, it could not be untrue, although a little too ruthless, to conclude that Maria is no better than a poor unmarried old woman dumped among the socially outcast. It is indeed a pity - and therefore appropriate for a tale of paralysis - that the heroine receives whatever will come her way without entertaining doubt, discontent or angst. In this sense, she is a willing victim of circumstances. Her philosophy of life, if she has any, is after all recapitulated by just three words: 'such was life' (113).

III

Among the traditional, almost endemic malaises of Irish society, Frank McCourt, who deserted Ireland like Joyce and emigrated to America, counts 'the poverty: the shiftless loquacious alcoholic father: the pious defeated mother moaning by the fire: ...' (11). Two of these time-honoured ghosts, albeit under different appellations, walk abroad in 'Clay' and stalk Maria like a shadow: one is
marriage, at times in the guise of men, and the other alcohol. The former is what she flatly laughs away but in truth strongly yearns for in secret. The latter is something she ever feels tremulous about but accepts in resignation for the reason of its deep infiltration into the mores and lifestyle of the nation. Indeed, *Dubliners* contains some tales in which alcohol plays a significant role in wreaking havoc on marriage and family life, most prominently ‘Counterparts’ (95-109) and, in a lesser degree, ‘Eveline’ (37-43) and ‘Grace’ (169-198). In his humorous writing, Liam O’Flaherty, one of Joyce’s contemporary Irish writers, chimes in on this respect with his unabashed reference to ‘the priests, the politicians, the publicans and the peasants’ (11) as the mighty pillars of society.

Joyce’s father, John, was a heavy drinker: so was the author himself – exactly, like father, like son. When men and alcohol are coupled, the union is more often than not associated with dire poverty, raging violence, miserable marriages, and broken families in Ireland. It is worth noticing that, when these two elements meet in ‘Clay’, a fascinating change takes place over the heroine: she has her essential virtues and abilities, either innate or acquired through hard work, such as affability, efficiency and caution, enfeebled to the point of extinction and herself ends up committing ludicrous errors. The initial section shows Maria looking forward to her night out and contemplating, ‘What a nice evening they would have, all the children singing!’ (111). Her felicitous anticipation is immediately clouded by the first manifestation of her deep-seated anxiety:

Only she hoped that Joe wouldn’t come in drunk. He was so different when he took any drink. (111)

It is not long before her misgiving turns into a reality.

In the meantime, the topic of marriage sneaks into the plot when the women at the laundry sit at the table for tea. Lizzie Fleming mentions, as she did the previous year, that ‘Maria was sure to get the ring’ (112). The prediction is grounded in no plausibility or credibility, since, as everyone knows, it has virtually become a joke repeated year after year at the expense of the heroine’s humility and good-naturedness. Then Ginger Mooney proposes a toast for Maria’s health, adding that ‘she was sorry she hadn’t a sup of porter to drink it in’ (112). This scene allows the heroine to retain her composure and her immunity to blunders for the reason that no real liquor is served at the table and that the laundry is an exclusive haven for women. On her part, Maria tolerates being a laughingstock of this kind, because she knows that the laundresses are ‘common women’ and that there are no ill feelings intended in their jokes and pranks. The result is her unrestrained laugh ‘till the tip of her nose nearly met the tip of her chin’ (112). With her guard down in the jovial atmosphere, she has a subtle change discernible on her face: ‘... her grey-green eyes sparkled with disappointed shyness’ (112). What the expression in her eyes implies practically, however, is never
annotated. ‘Green’ represents jealousy in the celebrated lines in Othello: ‘It is the green-ey’d monster which doth mock/ The meat it feeds on’ (III. 3. 166-7). In ‘An Encounter’ (18-28), the colour indicates something ominous and bizarre on account of the green eyes of the ‘queer old josser’ (26). The phrase ‘disappointed shyness’, on one hand, confirms the heroine’s hidden concern with marriage, and, on the other, evinces her precarious, suppressed state of mind.

The middle section of ‘Clay’ sees Maria gradually slide into a downward spiral of troublemaking. Once she steps out of her abode which provides her not only with room and board but also with physical and spiritual protection, she grows vulnerable to the sinister presence of men and their best partner of life, liquor. During her nocturnal rambling and visitation, her protection slips off layer by layer, and the wayward side of her persona grows more and more visible, sowing seeds of irritation and annoyance here and there. Maria stops at a cake shop in Henry Street, where she blushes when asked by a pretty attendant if it is wedding-cake that she plans to buy. Attention should be directed to the fact that the girl is ‘evidently a little annoyed’ (114) by the heroine’s tardiness in making an order. Maria’s conduct should not be regarded as unmannerly or troublesome by any standard, but it definitely signals the onset of her subtle transformation in the context. Similarly, the cake-shop episode as a whole appears banal and innocent in every aspect, but it serves to pave the way for greater incidents which involve both men and liquor.

The second tram which Maria climbs aboard on the night is packed with passengers. She mentally prepares herself to stand on the aisle when ‘an elderly gentleman ⋯ with a square red face and a greyish moustache’ (114) kindly makes room for her. During the ride, she enjoys a small chat with this ‘colonel-looking gentleman’, whom she ‘favoured with demure nods and hems’ (114). According to Adaline Glasheen, ‘Maria goes all queer in masculine company’ (102), but it seems that she makes no apparent mistakes here. The theme of alcohol is held back till the end of the section where the heroine reflects ‘how easy it was to know a gentleman even when he has a drop taken’ (114). Here again, the anecdote itself sounds quite trivial whether the man is sober or drunk, and nothing strange or sensational can be pointed out in it – until the plot harks back indirectly to it when Maria’s bag of plumcakes is found missing. The word ‘indirectly’ ought to be employed to indicate the hypothetical nature of the argument, since no one knows where Maria loses the parcel, nor does the author afford any clue to the enigma. However, highly conceivable is the inductive inference that she somewhat loses touch with her own self and makes the error during her second tram ride, the error over which she even ‘nearly cried outright’ (115) later. In other words, the barrier of protection that muffles her is broken open by the faintly drunken gentleman, who chats up the plain-looking spinster and leads her into an irredeemable blunder:
simply, the witch is outsmarted by the trickster.

IV

The finale of ‘Clay’ evokes a picture of a happy reunion and seasonal celebration. Naturally, the source of Maria’s fear flows and spills in a bountiful measure, while people precipitate with abandon into a disgraceful state of intoxication, as is implied by frequent allusions to ‘a bottle of stout … port wine … some more stout’ (116), ‘a glass of wine’ (117), and ‘the corkscrew’ (118). Right after Maria’s arrival, trouble rears its ugly head and glares at her grimly. The first mishap bursts forth when she notices the bag of plumcakes missing and asks if the children have eaten it. Uttering ‘no’ on a defiant note, they all look ‘as if they did not like to eat cakes if they were to be accused of stealing’ (115). This irksome incident kicks off a sequence of petty yet obnoxious anecdotes in which Maria finds herself in an awkward situation or wounds other people’s feelings in one way or another. First comes Joe’s elation for the ‘smart answer’ he made to the manager earlier in the office, Maria is at a loss why he laughs so much about what seems nonsense to her. Then Joe’s mood swings wildly to the other end of the spectrum when he becomes ‘cross’ and asks ‘how did they expect Maria to crack nuts without a nutcracker’ (116). He goes on to insist, without considering her needs or feelings, that she should take some alcoholic drink.

As is expected on such occasions, Maria and the Donnelly family start to talk about the good old days. A little deliberation urges the heroine to ‘put in a good word for Alphy’ (116) with a disastrous consequence. Joe instantly grows exasperated and ‘… there was nearly being a row on the head of it’ (116). The ‘veritable peacemaker’ (110) in the first part, divested of her magic along with her protection, turns into a busybody, gadfly and troublemaker all combined. However, Joe’s awareness of being a host and head of a family persuades him not to ‘lose his temper on account of the night it was’ (116) and to ask for more stout instead. When everyone settles back in a festive mood, the children start to play a traditional Halloween divination game, in which a prayer-book, a ring, a coin, water, and clay are used as common items on the saucers (Jackson & McGinley, 92). Each item signifies a life in a convent, marriage, richness, immigration, and death, respectively. With their eyes bandaged, participants grope for a saucer which prophesies their fortune in the coming year. One child gets a prayer book, and the other three water. Finally, one of the next-door girls wins a ring. Someone else always jumps ahead of Maria and seizes what she craves for. Then arrives Maria’s turn, and she ‘laughed and laughed again till the tip of her nose nearly met the tip of her chin’ (117). Her release of self-restraint, probably under the influence of alcohol, ushers in a menacing event. Truly, her first play entails Mrs. Donnelly’s ‘very cross’ (117) words
to one of the next-door girls and an ostensibly dampened festive mood.

The theme of marriage reigned by the ring in the game is developed further by Maria’s assent to Mrs. Donnelly’s request of singing a song. In a tiny, quavering voice (118), the heroine performs *I Dreamt that I Dwelt* on the accompaniment of Mrs. Donnelly’s piano. Then occurs something strange, about which the narrator impassively says that ‘when she came to the second verse she sang again’ (118) and proceeds to quote the first verse alone:

I dreamt that I dwelt in marble halls
With vassals and serfs by my side,
And of all who assembled within these walls
That I was the hope and the pride.

I had riches too great to count, could boast
Of a high ancestral name,
But I also dreamt, which pleased me most (sic.)
That you loved me still the same.

No reason is quoted for Maria’s repetition, and the text says curtly, ‘But no one tried to show her her mistake’ (118). The second verse skipped by the heroine goes as follows:

I dreamt that suitors sought my hand,
That knights upon bended knee,
And with vows no maiden heart could withstand,
That they pledged their faith to me.
And I dreamt that one of this noble host,
Came forth my heart to claim;
Yet I also dreamt, which charmed me most,
That you lov’d me still the same.

(Jackson and McGinley, 93).

The subject of love and courtship is shunned unconsciously by the performer, whose subliminal fear deepens with a drunken man and empty bottles around. And Maria almost succeeds in her efforts to keep the two taboos for herself as far away from each other as possible, for her singing, whatever flaws it may have, wells tears up in Joe’s eyes and makes him temporarily oblivious to ‘what he was looking for’ (118). The man in her song is lost but the son-figure in her life is saved from a further decline into an unregenerate state of drunkenness.

‘Clay’ might be subtitled ‘Lost and Not Found’ and is supposed to live up to the label with Joe’s
search still going on. However, the tale once again thwarts the expected course of action with the implication that Maria's fear is not alleviated at all and that more alcohol will be brought in to be consumed by the father-figure of the family. At the very end of the story, Joe recollects what he was searching for: '... in the end he had to ask his wife where the corkscrew was' (118). Contrary to Maria's personal wish, 'Clay' ends with an inauspicious aftertaste of 'Lost and Found'.

Does the same ending apply to the heroine, whose life is pitifully immersed in losses and sacrifices, in devotion and deprivation? The answer could be contradictory 'Yes' and 'No'. Loss and failure pile up in Maria's entire life up to the end of 'Clay'. No beauty blessed her at birth, no brightness in childhood, no bridal and familial happiness in adulthood. The absence of birthrights of such feminine orientation has robbed her of a lot more, such as affluence, social standing and security, to which ordinary people gain access without much trouble. Within the storyline of 'Clay', she finds a ring missing from her pieces of barmbracks. The whereabouts of the bag of plumcakes, for which she dearly paid out of her meagre salary, are totally incomprehensible to her. She has no prescience about what irritates Joe and the children. The verses of a popular song elude her memory. Or, she cannot confront any more loss even if it is fictional. Thus, life never displays its full expanse of opulence and diversity to Maria.

'Clay' chronicles some hours and no more of Maria's heavily circumscribed life and abruptly suspends its narration by sentencing her to the prospect of a bleak future. The verdict is symbolically announced by Joe's wife: 'Mrs. Donnelly said Maria would enter a convent before the year was out ...' (117). The divination of Maria's other choice is discreetly withheld from her, but Joe's wife, in spite of her prudence, fails to veil the sensitive issue of Maria's future in uncertainty. She broaches a possibility that the heroine's relocation to a Catholic institution is already settled. If so, even a fortune-telling game is outstripped by acts of men in Maria's self-denying, paralysed world. Seen in this perspective, 'Clay' could be a tale in which, before the year is out, the heroine is endowed with an opportunity to be herself in a very peculiar way, that is, by acting out her hidden persona, by living the opposites and contradictories of her own self, on the last Hallow Eve of her secular life.

Bibliography

Text:


Commentaries:


