

With a book like *Dubliners* and a writer like Joyce, we expect one chapter of this moral history to resemble others: one chapter or story enables us to understand another. For example, the song Maria sings at the end of “Clay” is from *The Bohemian Girl*, the opera Frank had taken Eveline to in “Eveline.” A story of Dublin adolescence becomes a story of Dublin maturity: Maria is an older Eveline. “Eveline” may even be seen as a chapter from Maria’s past. At the end of her story, Eveline will go back to care for two children; Maria cared for Joe and Alph. At the end of her story, Eveline rejects water (the voyage to Buenos Aires) and the ring (marriage to Frank) for the prayer book (celibacy) and clay (death).

Moreover, we expect a close resemblance among stories that seem to be in a series: Hugh Kenner groups “A Little Cloud,” “Counterparts,” “Clay,” and “A Painful Case” together. The resemblance of Chandler in “A Little Cloud” and Farrington in “Counterparts” is apparent: after each clerk leaves work, he spends a night on the town and returns home. Maria follows a comparable pattern of action. Like Chandler, the little boy in “Counterparts” is named Tom or Tommy. “Clay” also resembles “Counterparts” in that, like Farrington, Joe is proud of having made a smart remark to the manager of his office. I think it instructive that, whereas Farrington has no Christian name, Maria is called Maria forty-two times in “Clay.” But the main point is that the end of “Counterparts” reinforces the identification of Mary with Maria in the next story, “Clay”: “I’ll say a *Hail Mary* for you. . . . I’ll say a *Hail Mary* for you, pa, if you don’t beat me. . . . I’ll say a *Hail Mary*. . . .”

The emphasis on Chandler as a little child (he is called Little Chandler thirty-eight times) reinforces the emphasis on Maria as a little child. And in the penultimate episode of each story that child confronts death. Norris objects to her students’ contention that clay signifies death. But reading “A Little Cloud” as a guide to “Clay” makes that equation unmistakable. The Bunn song Maria sings may be said to replace the Byron poem begun by Little Chandler and then aborted:

Within this narrow cell reclines her clay,  
That clay where once. . . .

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To the Editor:

Margot Norris’s exegesis is thought-provoking—more so, I cannot at times help but fear, than “Clay” itself. Norris’s premise—that the narrative voice is so close to the perceptual stream of Maria herself as to be blind to any objective view of her habitual self-deception, while containing a more or less sufficiently consistent warp to be “read”—is compelling, a premise nicely deduced from

the blindfold game described later in the story and echoed still later in Joe’s “blinding” by tears.

Yet—though I must first swallow thrice (O mystic triad!)—I yearn to challenge the story itself. Supplying Maria with a long nose and chin on Halloween may be enough, intellectually, to stir witchery in the reader’s semi-consciousness, just as a game of blindman is enough to sound recognitions that vision and the lack thereof must be an issue here. This we learned from Sophocles—the blind see while the sighted who do *not* see end by poking out their symbolic orbs.

Fine symbols, but where are the living organs to feed them blood? How much of interest can actually be discerned in the 3,000-odd words of “Clay”? We are presented with a rather vague depiction of Maria’s situation in the laundry, a vague account of her tram odyssey after cakes, a filmy presentation of the party she attends at the home of a man the still-maiden Maria had “nursed” as a child.

Using twice as many words as the story itself, Norris skillfully suggests that very vagueness to be the substance here: it leads us to see how Maria *wishes* to see herself and, by extension, how she wishes *not* to see herself; and finally, this “due degree of heaven-bestowed” vagueness, if you will, forces readers to encounter their role in the story, metafictionally speaking, their own “objective” perceptions of Maria as an undesirable person, compelling them to complete the dotted line and holler “Witch! Old maid!”

I suspect that Norris’s estimation of “Clay” as a dramatization of “the powerful workings of desire in human discourse” (206) is powerfully kind to the author of a story whose composition, in my opinion, leaves something to be desired. Compared to other pieces in *Dubliners*—“The Dead,” say, or “Counterparts”—“Clay” seems consistently vague in its presentations and encounters, but can one legitimately elevate this vagueness to virtue by calling it a reflection of Maria’s character, of the inability to “see,” to perceive, to engage, that has left her an old maid? Which is it, Maria’s lack of engagement or the too few inches of her height and few too many centimeters of her nose and chin that force readers to identify the poor old woman as unwanted and in so doing to confront their own lack of compassion and empathy?

I fear that “Clay” leaves too many questions unsupplied with substance to allow for a satisfactory encounter with the story itself, which, in my opinion, lacks sufficient engagement. Where do we find the living organisms of, say, “Counterparts” or “The Dead”? Where are the “dirty eyes,” the concrete humiliations, the poor dead boys, the children who offer prayers to their fathers to avoid beatings, the specificities and particulars that create a story full enough to be fully engaged? In “Clay” we have vague reference to reformed prostitutes, to faceless, nameless children, to a conflict between Joe and his brother, to a “break-up” in the home where Maria has

worked as some sort of governess, to ambiguous situations, characters, and happenings; and none of it seems to add up to a great deal beyond the characterization of Maria as pathetic. Having walked with Norris around the story's perimeter, having seen the lights of *her* eyes assigned to the story, one finds it difficult to hold her perspective from the story. After all, Joyce *is* a master, and his portrait of Maria *is* intriguing. But to bring this characterization, so embedded in its slice of life, forth to the realm of story, where more than the vaguest of engagements might be expected to take place, requires an imaginative act no less aggressive than Norris's, and even hers is hard-pressed to lift the veil of obscurity to some final comprehension of why we are left with Joe blinded by tears over Balfé and his corkscrew while Maria still, presumably, stands blushing by the piano. Is the revelation complete? Is there an epiphany at all? What actually happened? An unmarried woman of unspecified age (forty? fifty? sixty?) has lost a piece of cake, has annoyed the children of her former employer, whom, either directly or indirectly, she causes to weep; and because of her long nose and the day's being Halloween we are to think of her as a witch.

So much is left unsaid here, undone perhaps. Did the potter's hand shake? Or, in his eagerness to understate this "Clay," did the young master fall into sins of omission? More power to Margot Norris for seeking his absolution.

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#### Reply:

The two letters responding to my essay on "Clay" are so different in the estimation they offer—William Bache pointing to my obtuse moral sense and offering correction, Thomas Kennedy commending my cleverness with the cautionary compliment that I may have written a better story than Joyce did—that I need to reply to them consecutively.

Bache's letter did indeed make me feel dull. I have read it over and over, and, like Maria with her blindfold on, I fear I still don't "get it." I am asked to see a "moral history" (whatever that is) in a series of equations: Maria as a four-sided figure, old maid-child-witch-Virgin Mary, serving four barmbracks in a laundry-brothel-nunnery-prison, confronting four game tokens, ring-water-prayer book-clay. She is ostensibly related to other old maids and children in *Dubliners* and, by name, to the Virgin Mary the Farrington boy prays to. If Maria is like the Virgin Mary because her name is Maria, does every Irish-woman named Mary, including the adulterous Marion Bloom and the nationalistic Molly Ivors, then become a Virgin Mary figure? It makes more sense to me to look to function rather than antonomasia in establishing this identification, to point to Maria's intercession in acts of

violence, her protection of the dummy in the laundry as the Virgin Mary protects (or, actually, fails to protect) the Farrington child. But the witch identification has no such functional basis—unless one projects that Maria (like the gingerbread witch of "Hansel and Gretel") really wishes to eat the children to whom she gives the bag of cakes. Bache's identifications are based on widely dissimilar premises, and it is therefore unclear what moral point his symbolic identifications produce. Bache doesn't say, and given my critical penchant for interrogating gaps and silences in texts, I am curious why he first promises correction of my essay and then refuses to make explicit the moral insights I am supposed to have gotten. I tried to make sense of his symbolic algebra by deciphering and narrativizing his free associations but felt, like Maria, that I was asked to palpate a soft, wet, malleable substance whose nature and meaning I could not (and perhaps did not want to) guess.

Ironically, I had anticipated that I would most likely be faulted for my moralism, for using the critical moves from an antihumanistic theoretical tradition to make the liberal gesture of chiding readers of both genders for their prejudices against women in general and against poor, old, homely, spinsterish women in particular. I would have thought I had uncovered Joyce's critique of Dublin's moral decay in "Clay" but, recognizing this as a retrograde reading of the work, had gone to some rhetorical pains to conceal my embarrassment over this gesture. Either I was too clever for Bache, disguising my moralizing so well that he never saw it, or Bache was too clever for me, offering me the bait of elisions, knowing that these would flush out the confession of my hidden moralistic agenda.

Thomas Kennedy's letter, with its gracious and disarming flattery, is far more difficult to answer, in part because it articulates my own early doubts about whether I over-interpret the text and, as it were, out-Joyce Joyce. In reply, I offer both disagreement and concession. I disagree with Kennedy's characterization of "Clay" as vague, because I make a structural distinction between vagueness or filminess of representation and the present absences that I characterize variously as gaps, silences, or blind spots. The problem of critical blindness and insight in "Clay" is not one of focus, of keen vision and sharp detail, but one of narrative candor, of the strategic offering and withholding of information from the reader. A gap is therefore not a blur: it has a definite, albeit negative, shape—like that of a paper cutout.

But this leaves Kennedy's larger question of authorial intention and control: does Joyce deliberately plant gaps, silences, and blind spots in the story or does the inexperienced writer merely fail to create a coherent and full-bodied narrative? I again disagree with Kennedy that "Clay" is technically or qualitatively inferior to other *Dubliners* stories. The technique of the discursive gap, for example, is perhaps the most conspicuous feature of "An Encounter," where it takes the form of a famous ellipsis