

Themes and Techniques in James Joyce's *Clay*

Ms. P. Sujeetha

Lecturer in English

TSWRDC

Warangal, Telangana, India

p.s.jeeth@gmail.com

Abstract

James Joyce, a prolific Irish writer of his age. 'Clay' from *Dubliners* is known for its varied themes and techniques. It renders captivating opportunities for the readers to present his/her own perception of symbolism to 'Clay'. Joyce has displayed a double level of symbolism structure which he explicitly managed to handle paradoxical symbolic element simultaneously. The title 'Clay' itself has a symbolic meaning – in the human world it has less worth but this unworthy element has the capacity to mould to any given shape. Maria, the protagonist is a symbolic representation of Clay at one level and Mother Ireland at another level. Themes of poverty, triggered social relationships are shown through the technique of symbolism.

Keywords: Symbolism, Maria, Themes, Techniques, Clay

Introduction

Symbolism as a Technique in clay

Symbolism, a technique used by Joyce to expose the real human world. 'Clay' by Joyce is highly rich in symbols. Clay stands for dust. In the story, Maria is symbolically represented as Clay. Maria, an old lonely woman works in Lamplight laundry. She lives in a place, where women are shunned and left out. She is a staunch catholic follower, living amongst Protestant and other denomination group woman presents her tolerant nature and symbol of peace maker. As she symbolises peace maker this associates her to mother Mary. Her name itself is an alternative to Mary. Many characteristics of Maria has a deeper connection with mother Mary. Firstly her name, secondly her being single shows the virgin status. Further development in the story reveals her caring and loving attitude towards Joe and Alphy.

Religious symbolism is prevalent throughout the story. On Halloween's day, Maria plans to visit Dolleney's family. During the evening a traditional Irish divination game was arranged by the girl living next door of Joe's house. The prediction inherent in the divination as a part of the celebration of Halloween about the approaching end to the life of the elderly Maria and her belief in the rituals associated with her religion is indicative of this. Clothes act as powerful symbols to display. Maria appears dress for an evening out show.

Maria is symbolic to Ireland which is forgotten under British rule. Maria is not the old women but she represents Ireland herself. In the hands of British, Ireland was moulded and condemned perhaps to a lot of submissions. At the end, when Maria touches clay: in the story Maria and Clay are symbolically equal.

Clay symbolizes death once again breaks the boundary between the outside/exterior and the interior/inside world of the story. Clay brought from the garden/lawn outside, almost becomes a piece of nature that threatens to collapse the inner private room of the household-a symbol of culture.

Disconnection, isolation of Maria from the real world. She lives in the laundry which set up to provide relief and housing to women who had incurred difficulty in their lives. People

living in the laundry would have been closed off for a while she is deciding which cake to buy in the shop, the women behind the counter is being sarcastic. This also suggests a disconnection from the realities of the world. The ideal disconnection I explored from the real world near the end of the story when Mrs. Donnelly tells Maria that she will enter a convent by the end of the year. Again Joyce may be suggesting that life in a convent (may be an escape from realities) of the world.

Joyce uses the symbolism of the colour brown that dominates the entire story.

She was glad of her old brown waterproof. (113)

Maria's raincoat is in brown so is the colour of the hat of the man on the tramp. Above all the central image of the story, Clay is also brownish. The wet and soft substance represents death. Maria herself is brown and in the verge of death.

In the divination game, Maria picking Clay, is a symbol for her pending death or her continued stunted development /paralysis. It is also significant that Maria was blindfolded. Again this may be symbolism for Maria's inability to see where her life is going and Joyce may be suggesting a continued paralysis for Maria

By the end of the story, Joe recalls for what he is been searching for.

.....in the end he had to ask his wife where the corkscrew was (118)

A corkscrew that Joe looks for when he is full of tears upon hearing Maria's song is the symbol of the way people avoid facing painful reality by focussing on trivial objects.

Various themes in Clay

Poverty is a dominant theme in the story. Maria's response and reaction when realises that the cake she bought was lost especially painful because the cost was she shell down her modest means towards such expensive food. Through her limited earnings Maria intends to

treat her beloved family members. Her agony and helplessness are seen when she realises, the cake she bought is missing, this is pitiful and critical under this light.

The theme of intrusion is of course already played over Maria's entry into the house. What is deeply disturbing about the narrative strategy in the story is the way Maria is described by Joyce.

Maria was a very, very small person indeed but she had a
very long nose and a very long chin. She talked a little
through her nose, always soothingly:(110)

Like the word, clay witch is also never mentioned in the Halloween story but the hints are only too insistent to be ignored. The anxiety about the presence of the strangers' outsiders, absolute others almost metaphorical. Maria represents a witchlike figure whose ominous presence forcibly brings back the uncomfortable question of death and complete disruption of communal harmony at the feast. She is identified as a figure of evil –spirit whose very presence in the feast wishes to obliterate .She is that stranger whose entry into the house was supposed to prevent.

Triggered Social Relationships: Every social relationship in the Clay execute the theme of the disintegration of human understanding and inhumanity. Maria served Donnelly's family for many years and nursed Joe and Alphy two brothers. As the years passed the two bothers disowned Maria and left her alone. She was shunned off, to a work in as a laundry worker. Subtle minds of socio-economic status are dropped .Joe and Alphy are well off but not at peace with each other. Maria who becomes a burden to them so they show a way out by breaking a relationship with her. The theme of intrusion is of course played over Maria's entry into the house when she is unwelcome by the people in Joe's and Alpha's family members.

Inhumanity: as Maria walks across the city and boards a tram, the young men who fail to give her seat shows the indifference of the young generation towards older people is at the display. This talks about the inhuman attitude.

At Joe's house, the way people greet and receive her shows disrespect, children and the party gatherers play pranks on her thus making her an object of fun.

Maria's 'forgetfulness' is another theme which can be noticed in the story. Maria repeats the first verse of "I Dreamt that Dwelt" is clear with the construction of the repetitions on which the story is built. Maria is unable to sing the second verse not because there is a theme of marriage in it, but right from the initial start of the story, Maria's actions are repetitive and in opposition. She takes the first tramp, thinks of Joe and his brother Alphy to be friends with each other in spite of knowing the fact they aren't in terms. She takes the second tramp encounters a group of impolite young boys but an elderly gentlemen tries to be concerned about her. Her going to two different cake-shops to buy two types of cakes this implies Maria's repetitive nature. This repetition further leads to the repetition of the verse which leads to 'moral paralysis' which is present in Joyce's stories. Maria here represents Ireland which is forgotten.

Conclusion:

James Joyce's Clay suggests how Maria's life has become unimportant and insignificant just as daily chores. Various events that takes place in the story are highly symbolic in approach and many themes at display. The remarkable combination of themes and techniques produce the underlying meaning of Clay or decomposition.

Works Cited

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