

"CLAY" OR A MODEL OF REPETITION

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Two things have called the critics' attention¹ in James Joyce's "Clay," the tenth story in *Dubliners*: the symbolic duplicity of Maria, at the same time the witch and the Virgin, and the omission, when Maria sings "I Dreamt that I Dwelt," of the second stanza of the song, the hit tune from the opera *The Bohemian Girl*, libretto by Alfred Bunn and music by Michael William Balfe.² Although Joyce presents this omission in an ambiguous way ("she sang again," "no one tried to show her her mistake"³), much attention has been given, in critical analysis of the story, to the stanza which is not sung, where there are references to marriage, something Maria, old and ugly, could not aspire to.⁴

According to those interpretations of Joyce's short story, Maria can not sing the second verse of the song because, "consciously or unconsciously she rejects such a direct statement of her own situation" (Hudson), "she sees herself ridiculous and rather ugly" (Moon). Her omission of the second verse of the song constitutes "a Freudian accident," since Maria is "a libido-ridden old maid" (Cowan). Tindall understands that the second verse of the song, "which concerns love and suitors, suits one who, lacking love and avoiding fertility, has chosen prayer and death," while Staley says that Maria "does not sing the second verse with its references to marriage and happiness, because, for the first time, she sees her life for what it is." The diversity of interpretations demonstrates well the difficulty introduced by Joyce in his short story. However, it is not in the continual reference to the stanza which is not sung that resides the key for a possible interpretation of

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"Clay," but in the ambiguity through which the story is presented, for the narrative discourse in "Clay" is also ambiguous.

The first two paragraphs of the story can be taken as an example. First, there is the opposition between "the matron" and Maria.

The matron had given her leave to go out as soon as the women's tea was over and Maria looked forward to her evening out. The kitchen was spick and span: the cook said you could see yourself in the big copper boilers. The fire was nice and bright and on one of the side-tables were four very big barnbracks. These barnbracks seemed uncut; but if you went closer you would see that they had been cut into long thick even slices and were ready to be handed round at tea. Maria had cut them herself. (99)

Any attentive reader can detect, in this first paragraph, the signals of a re-written Cinderella story: the young woman who works very much, does everything right and, perhaps, lives a sad life. Since there is a matron, there are also the possible stepsisters ("The women"). The very choice of the name Maria is suggestive for it reminds us of the Blessed Virgin, by tradition represented as always young. Since Maria "looked forward to her evening out" (another sign of "cinderellaty"), we wait for the reason: a ball or a dance, perhaps?

A surprise, however, meets us in the second paragraph, defamiliarizing the process established by the first one.

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: Yes, my dear, and No, my dear. She was always sent for when the women quarrelled over their tubs and always succeeded in making peace. One day the matron had said to her: — Maria, you are a veritable peace-maker!

The beginning of the first sentence in this new paragraph destroys Maria's image of a "pretty girl," to insist on her ugliness. What is surprising is not the fact that Maria is "a very, very small person," an image that somehow can be brought

together with that of a "pretty girl." After all, small persons can be pretty, or vice-versa. What is defamiliarizing here is the repetition of the adverb "very," and the emphasis expressed by another adverb, "indeed," as if the narrator, convinced that the readers will doubt him, wants to make Maria seem even smaller than she really is. The second half of this same sentence stresses this impression even more, for now Maria is described as having "a very long nose and a very long chin," with the emphatic repetition of "very long." As if still unconvinced, the narrator introduces this part of the sentence as an adversative clause, which makes Maria's nose and chin even bigger. The image of a small person with a big nose and a big chin would not be so strange if introduced by the conjunction "and," which would only add one information to the other (small person + big nose + big chin). However, the use of "but" in this sentence not only adds one information to the other, it also opposes this second information to the previous one: small person + (antithesis) + big nose + big chin. Thus, the nose and the chin are not only big, considering Maria's height, they also intensify the disparity between Maria's features (very small, very ugly, a witch, as Marvin Magalanes wants) and her personality (good, hard worker, peace-maker). The process of defamiliarization is then doubled, for it is introduced on the level of the story (when it defamiliarizes the Cinderella figure through which Maria is presented in the first paragraph) and on the level of the discourse (through the repetition of the adverbs and the use of the adversative "but").

The rest of the information given in the second paragraph only enlarges that opposition: the nose is given an attribute (Maria talks "a little through her nose"), by its turn also opposed to another information (although through her nose, Maria talks "soothingly"); even though able to speak, that is, to express her own ideas, Maria never really expresses them, she has only "yes" and "no" answers, whatever the situation is. This explains her description as a "peace-maker", and a "veritable" one, her ability for making peace being testable in its truth or accuracy through, for instance, a comparison: Maria

opposed to the "quarrelling women."

All these micro-oppositions are a development of the macro-opposition between paragraph one, which presents Maria through her attributes of "(possible) beauty," "goodness," "hard worker," and paragraph two, which presents Maria through her attributes of "shortness," "ugliness," "peace-maker." These oppositions constitute a first characteristic of the text of "Clay," for in this short story, as well as in other works by Joyce, things are not what they seem to be: Maria seems to be fragile, but she is a hard worker; she is ugly like a witch, but she is a good person, and so on. Maria's appearance and reality are, thus, ambiguous. In fact, there are two Marias, the outward ugly, witch-like small person, and the inward good, caring, peace-making person.

Through the process of defamiliarization, the narrator of "Clay" is able to establish that ambiguity which, as a matter of fact, had been introduced in the text of the story when the barnbracks were mentioned, for they "seemed uncut; but... they had been cut" indeed. Here we find, for the first time, the adversative "but," the same conjunction used later in the second paragraph. The difference is that here the use of "but" is not defamiliarizing, functioning as a warning to the reader (the supposition "if you went closer"), a warning that something will strike him later: the defamiliarizing rupture that paragraph two establishes in relation to the context of paragraph one. The narrator in "Clay" wants his readers to know that his text, his narrative discourse, is not what it seems to be. In order to find out what this text is, the reader must do what the narrator invites him to do as far as the barnbracks are concerned: go "closer." But even this "go closer" is somewhat illusive. We can not forget that other phrase in paragraph one: "you could see yourself in the big copper boilers." Since the boilers are round, they will reflect only a distorted image, an ambiguous image, we could add. To go closer becomes, then, the way to disclose the text of "Clay."

However, to disclose the text of "Clay" is precisely to find out its structural reason, or reasons. One of them, it has

been mentioned, is the ambiguity through which Maria is presented at the beginning of the story, and which is in symmetrical relation to the ambiguity through which the fact that Maria repeats the first verse of the song "I Dreamt that I Dwelt," at the end of the story, is described. Although a series of symbolic interpretations has been proposed for that omission of the second verse of the song, no attention has been given to the fact that Maria's "mistake" is a repetition,⁶ the repetition of the first verse of Balfe's song. And this constitutes a difference which must also be explained.

We have already seen that two signals are common to the initial and final groups of information in "Clay," repetition and ambiguity (on the level of the story as well as on the level of the discourse). The passage from one group to the other must reveal, then, the narrative coherence of the story. In other words, its structural organization. If I. I. Ravzin is right when he says that "in each process of elaborating the information, we can identify a certain group A of initial signals and a certain group B of final signals observed," and that "the task of a scientific description is to explain how the transition from A to B is effected and what links are between these two groups,"⁷ then an explanation for the structure of "Clay" can only be given from the discovery and analysis of other signals of repetition and ambiguity which would justify Maria's "mistake" in repeating the first verse of Balfe's song.

In fact, the whole story is a series of correlative repetitions, in other words, the story is structured through a pattern of repetitions. Some of these repetitions have already been mentioned. The others are: the reference to Maria's big nose and big chin (99) is repeated three more times, for whenever Maria laughs "the tip of her nose nearly met the tip of her chin" (twice on 101, once on 105); the references to the Hallow Eves games (by Lizzie Fleming on 101) at the laundry, and the games themselves at Joe's house (105); the barnbracks Marian cuts at the laundry and the cakes she buys in two different shops while going to Joe's house (102); the two trams Maria takes to go from Ballsbridge, where the laundry she works in is, to Drumcondra,

where Joe's house is, and the trip itself, in two stages, each one taking twenty minutes (100), from Ballsbridge to Pillar and from Pillar to Drumcondra. The title of the story already calls attention to repetition, since clay is a natural material that is used in making, among other things, bricks, tiles, and pottery, which can be done through modeling and repetition.

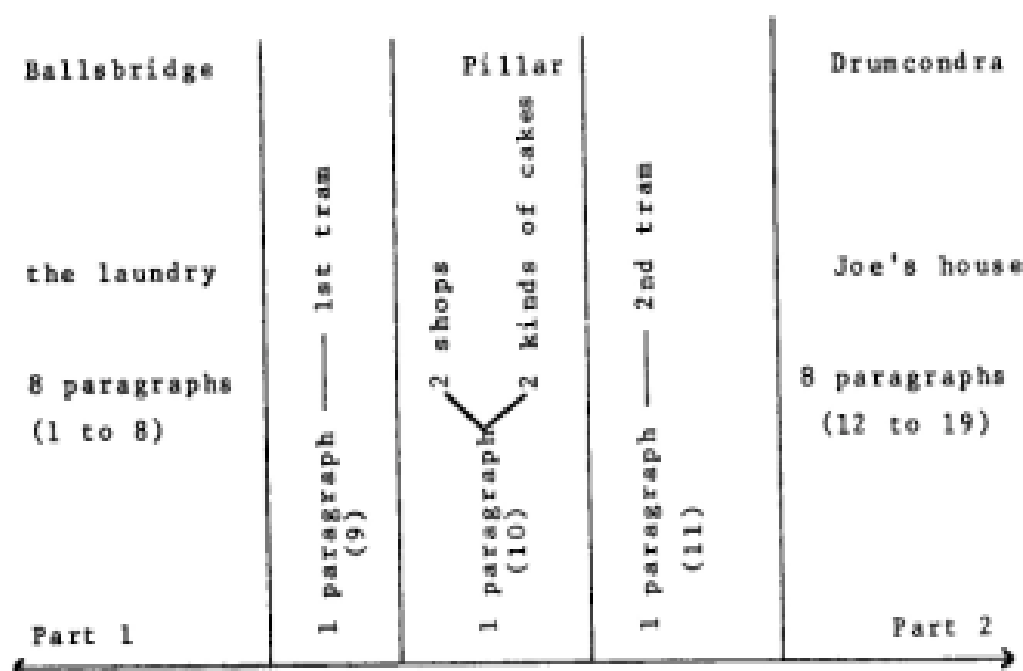
But all this would still be meaningless unless we found the structure that unifies these repetitions in "Clay." The first and the second paragraphs with their repetitions give us a hint of this structure.

Paragraph one begins with the **matron** giving Maria permission to go out, and paragraph two ends with the **matron** saying that Maria is "a veritable peacemaker." There are two references to Maria as a peacemaker at the end of paragraph two, and two references to the **barnbracks** at the end of paragraph one. Maria's name is twice repeated in paragraph one, and twice in paragraph two. Also, some grammatical constructions are repeated: "the **kitcher** as spick and span," "the fire was nice and bright," "a very, very small person indeed," "a very long nose and a very long chin." Another interesting repetition appears in "the **big copper boilers**" and "four very **big barnbracks**: the compound and the plural forms (copper - boilers, barn - bracks). There is also a repetition in the opposition in the example of how Maria talks through her nose: "Yes, my dear, and No, my dear."

These two initial paragraphs, built through a pattern of repetitions, are the basis for the structure of "Clay," with paragraph two reflecting, through its own repetitions, and as if in a mirror, the structure of repetitions in paragraph one. Since antithesis is a form of repetition, as Todorov says,⁸ we can divide Joyce's short story in two parts, the first being the one which gives us Maria at the laundry, and the second, the one which gives us Maria at Joe's house. In order to better describe the structure of the story, we can enumerate its paragraphs and group them.

The text of "Clay" is composed of nineteen paragraphs. From paragraph 1 to paragraph 8 we have Maria at the laundry "Dublin

by Lamplight" (100). Paragraph 9 presents Maria in the first tram she takes to go from Ballsbridge to Pillar. Paragraph 10 present Maria in the two shops where she buys two different kinds of cakes. Paragraph 11 presents Maria in the second tram she takes to go from Pillar to Drumcondra. From paragraph 12 to paragraph 19 we have Maria at Joe's house. As in the chart below:



We find, thus, the same number of paragraphs (eight) in the two parts of the story, plus one more paragraph in each part, which present Maria in the two trams. There is a similarity between the repetitive/oppositive structures of paragraphs 1 and 2, and the division of the text of "Clay," that is, the text of the story is divided in two parts which are also in relation through repetition/opposition: the second part of the story (second tram — Joe's house) reflects the first part (the laundry — first tram), with an intermediary section between them (paragraph 9).

Because of this geometrical structure, the process of repetition in "Clay" becomes more evident. There are references in the story to: the barnbracks (paragraph 1), the mixed penny cakes and the plumcake (paragraphs 10 and 13); Maria's ugliness

in opposition to her kindness (paragraphs 2 and 3), Maria's kindness in opposition to her awkwardness — she forgets the plumcake in the tram to Drumcondra and, at Joe's house, accuses the children of stealing it (paragraphs 12 and 13); the fact that "everyone was so fond of Maria" (100; paragraph 3), and that "she said they were all very good to her" (105), which means they were "fond of" her (paragraph 17); Maria thinking about the relationship between Joe and Alphy, his brother, and wishing everything to be fine (paragraph 4), Maria mentioning Alphy to Joe, upsetting him, but, at the same time, wishing everything to be fine at the party (paragraph 15); Maria thinking about how she would like to, but would never live with Joe and his family (paragraph 5), Maria feeling happy at the party, but getting the prayer-book in the games, where it means "go to a convent" and is equivalent to "not to live with Joe and his family" (paragraph 17); Maria, a Catholic, thinking of how the Protestants are "very nice people to live with" (100; paragraph 6), the next-door girls playing a trick on Maria, making her get the saucer with clay (paragraph 16); the women at the laundry getting together for tea, and Lizzie Fleming wishing Maria to get the ring in the games at Joe's house (paragraph 7), and the next-door girls preventing her from getting it (paragraph 16)); Maria getting ready to go out and looking, in the mirror, at her "nice tidy little body" (101; paragraph 8), Maria singing, at Joe's house, "in a tiny quavering voice" (106; paragraph 18); Maria taking the first tram and thinking of Joe and Alphy now, when they are old and enemies, and then, when they were boys and "the best of friends" (102; paragraph 9), Maria taking the second tram and confronting a group of impolite young men and "an elderly gentleman" who "made room for her" (102; paragraph 11). In paragraph 10 there are references to Maria going to two cake-shops and buying two kinds of cakes — Maria repeats her actions twice.

The most significant of these repetitions, however, is the opposition between the scenes of remembrance, which pervade Part I ["five years before, when he and Alphy had gone to Belfast" (100; paragraph 4), "she had nursed him and Alphy too" (100;

paragraph 5), "remembering that the next morning was a mass morning" (101; paragraph 8), "when they were boys together" (102; paragraph 9)], and the senses of **forgetfulness**, which pervade Part 2 ["she began to look for her plumcake... but nowhere could she find it" (104; paragraph 13), "nobody could find the nutcrackers" (104; paragraph 14), "when she came to the second verse she sang again... her mistake" (106; paragraphs 18 and 19), "he could not find what he was looking for" (106; paragraph 19)].

We can conclude that Maria's "mistake" in repeating the first verse of "I Dreamt that I Dwelt" is coherent with the structure of repetitions on which the story is built. On the other hand, if we insist on the fact that Maria, consciously or unconsciously, **forgets** to sing the second verse of Balfe's song, her **forgetfulness** is also coherent with the structure of the story, for the same reason, **repetition**, in opposition to **remembrance**. It turns out to be irrelevant to insist on the theme of marriage, present in the "forgotten" verse of the song, and Maria's inability to sing it because of that. Maria can not sing that second verse because, in the structure of "Clay," the pattern of repetitions established in the initial paragraphs of the story must have its correlative in the final paragraphs. In other words, the structure of the story does not allow Maria to sing that second verse, not because it refers to marriage, but because, more important than the theme of marriage is the **senic opposition between remembrance and forgetfulness**, which represents the transition from a "group A of initial signals" of repetition (in the first two paragraphs), and "a group B of final signals" of repetition (the first verse of the song in the two final paragraphs). This transition is what I wanted to explain here.

On a symbolic level, Maria's forgetfulness is another development of the theme of "moral paralysis" present in **Dubliners**. Thus, Maria "is not only a poor old woman, Maria is like the Poor Old Woman or Ireland herself,"⁹ an Ireland who forgot "that knights... pledged their faith to me," and can only

remember, ironically, "riches too great to count" (106), an Ireland ruled (moulded as/in clay) by British hands and condemned, as it must have seemed to Joyce (in 1905, when the short story was written), to an endless submission (a pattern of repetition). This is the reason why Maria touches the saucer with clay: in the structure of the story Maria and clay are equivalent.

I am inclined to believe Thomas Staley right when he says that "there is no conflict of focus between the touching of the clay and the song," and that "the episode with the clay is the dramatic climax of" the story. However, in the light of my reading of "Clay," Maria does not reach "an understanding of herself;" nor is she "confronted with the terrible emptiness of her life," as Prof. Staley argues,¹⁰ otherwise she would have sung the second verse of the song. Maria/Ireland can not sing that second verse because she can not remember (or is not aware of it anymore — moral paralysis) her "knights on bended knee." The epiphany, I agree with Prof. Tindall (although for other reasons), is Joe's. Is this not the reason why Joe cries? Because of Maria's/Ireland's submissive life, molded as/in clay?

NOTES

¹See, for example, Cleanth Brooks et al., *An Approach to Literature*, 4th ed. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1964), pp.60-65; David Madden, "James Joyce's 'Clay,'" *The University Review*, XXXIII (Spring 1967), 229-233; Florence L. Walzl, "Joyce's 'Clay,'" *The Explicator*, XX (Feb. 1962), item 46; G. Ralph Smith, "A Superstition in Joyce's 'Clay,'" *James Joyce Quarterly*, 2 (Winter 1965), 133-134; Marvin Magalaner, "The Other Side of James Joyce," *Arizona Quarterly*, IX (Spring 1953), 5-16; Norman Holmes Pearson, "Joyce's 'Clay,'" *The Explicator*, VII (Oct. 1948), item 9; Phillips George Davies, "Maria's Song in Joyce's 'Clay,'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, I (winter 1964), 153-154; Richard B. Hudson, "Joyce's 'Clay,'" *The Explicator*, VI (Mar. 1948), item 30; Richard Carpenter and Daniel Leary, "The

Witch Maria," *The James Joyce Review*, 3 (1959), 3-7; S. A. Cowan, "Joyce's 'Clay,'" *The Explicator*, XXIII (Mar. 1965), item 50; Thomas E. Connolly, "Marriage Divination in Joyce's 'Clay,'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, III (Spring 1966), 293-299; Thomas F. Staley, "Moral Responsibility in Joyce's 'Clay,'" *Renaissance*, XVIII (Spring 1966), 124-128; William T. Noon, "Joyce's 'Clay,': an Interpretation," *College English*, 17 (Nov. 1955), 93-95; William York Tindall, *A Reader's Guide to James Joyce* (New York: Noonday Press, 1971), pp.29-31.

²Don Gifford, *Notes for Joyce* (New York: Dutton, 1967), p. 42.

³James Joyce, *Dubliners*, ed. Robert Scholes in consultation with Richard Ellmann (New York: Viking Press, 1967), p.106; subsequent references parenthetical by page number.

⁴The second verse of the song says (see *Notes for Joyce*, p. 54): "I dreamt that suitors sought my hand,/That knights on bended knee,/And with vows no maiden heart could withstand,/ They pledged their faith to me.//And I dreamt that one of that noble band,/Came forth my heart to claim,/But I also dreamt, which charmed me most/That you loved me all the same."

⁵The notion of defamiliarization is in Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Maria J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), pp.5-24.

⁶For the notion of repetition, as used here, see Tzvetan Todorov, "The Categories of Literary Narrative," trans. Joseph Kestner, *PMLA*, in July, 16 (1980), 3-36.

⁷Quoted by Roland Barthes, "Where to begin?," *New Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), p. 80.

⁸"The Categories of Literary Narrative," pp.6-7; the other forms of repetition are "parallelism" and "gradation."

⁹William York Tindall, *A Reader's Guide to James Joyce*, p. 30; in the Irish folklore, Ireland is always represented by a poor old woman. See, for example, the character "Poor Old

Woman", in Yeats' play "Cathleen ni Houlihan," *Eleven Plays of William Butler Yeats*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares (New York: Collier Books, 1978), pp.221-231.

¹⁰"Moral Responsibility in Joyce's 'Clay,'" p.126.

¹¹For the notion of **epiphany**, see James Joyce, *Stephen Hero*, ed. Theodore Spencer (New York: New Directions, 1963), pp.210-213; in this part of the novel which later became *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen Dedalus explains to Cranly his theory of epiphany.