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**JOYCE'S FICTION
AND
THE NEW RISE
OF
THE NOVEL**

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The James Joyce Italian Foundation*

*edited by
Franca Ruggieri*

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A SPINSTER BY CHOICE, CIRCUMSTANCE, OR CALAMITY? POTENTIAL REASONS FOR PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL SPINSTERHOOD IN JAMES JOYCE'S *DUBLINERS*

When James Joyce wrote *Dubliners* in 1914, he certainly could not have imagined that in the next century, there would be books on every subject that remotely pertained to the female characters that he created¹. Given the cultural developments that have been made with regard to female identity as a part of the Irish consciousness, there is a need to explore how the image of the Irish female has changed—both in the literary context and in the broader national context of Ireland itself. As the social and cultural boundaries change, rules that were held in place by moral codes start to break, and, as they do, information becomes available that helps scholars analyze literature as it relates to the new historical material. Marriage and spinsterhood in the 20th century was largely determined by chance in terms of time, choice of mate, and social codes. While the stories in *Dubliners* are classified as fictional, they portray snapshots of lives stunted, shattered, and altered by true historical events—whether it was the Great Famine of the mid-19th century or the over-zealous use of Magdalen Asylums in the 20th century. In the 21st century, however, the world has begun to realize that

¹ All references to *Dubliners* come from Joyce, James and Margot Norris. *Dubliners: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*. 1st ed. ed., New York, W.W. Norton, 2006. Print. Any direct quotations from *Dubliners* will be marked with D and the corresponding page number.

many of these events, and their effects on the women of Ireland, were tucked away in a corner of national history that no one sought to unveil until recently².

For the most part, many of the female characters in *Dubliners*, and especially the women in “Eveline,” “The Dead,” and “Clay” are women who are on the fringes of society. Both Eveline and Maria are unmarried women and of the lower socioeconomic side of life, but their marital status tells a story that Joyce starts, but never finishes. Gretta, in “The Dead,” is decidedly more refined as the wife of Gabriel Conroy, but even her story has untapped cultural significance. Spinsterhood, especially in literature, is an interesting concept. Whether spinsterhood arrives at a character’s metaphorical doorstep by chance, calculated design, or calamity, the women in Joyce’s stories have more to say about their lives and marital choices than they are saying. By looking at the cultural history and heritage of Ireland in the 20th century as it pertained to the gendering of women and to the morally acceptable codes of sexual behaviour, one is able to see that there is a cultural backstory behind each female character which Joyce alludes to but never explicitly tells.

For Ireland, the confines of moral and social law created a barrier against the unspeakable—which included relationships outside of wedlock, as well as sexual, physical and emotional abuse. It was for the sake of keeping all of these acts taboo that cultural travesties like the Magdalen Laundries were allowed to exist, functioning as workhouses for women who were, or might become, sexual liabilities. An unmarried woman could be considered a sexual liability if she were deemed “too pretty” and might be enticed into performing an act of

² During the summer of 2014, a mass grave containing the remains of 800 children, likely offspring of Magdalen Laundresses, was found (Roberts 2014: para. 10). This particular mass grave was in a “sewage tank” (Justice for Magdalenes, 2015: 45). The first Irish Magdalen Asylum was opened in 1767—meaning that the cultural cruelty occurring in the Asylums began centuries before this particular grave was instituted (Roberts 2014: para.10, Finnegan 2004: 8).

sexual immorality³ (Smith 2007: 136). Furthermore, a woman could be committed to a Magdalen Asylum if she had an intellectual disability and may not have had the mental capacity to determine right from wrong⁴ (*Sex in a Cold Climate* 1998: Part 1; Smith 2007: 136). While the topic of matrimony is vast, and this essay cannot serve as a vast cultural revelation on the women of *Dubliners*, it opens a window on the treatment of actual married and unmarried women in Ireland in the 20th century – letting in some much needed light.

In Joyce's time, women remained unmarried for a variety of reasons. While some women were forced into a life of singleness out of necessity or shame, some women consciously chose to remain unmarried out of a sense of patriotic or familial duty. The Great Famine that occurred in Ireland during the middle of the 19th century had a widespread effect on marital decisions and population growth in Ireland (Lowe-Evans 1989: 1-2). Prior to the beginning of the Great Famine, young men and women married at a young age (Kent n.d.: 526-527). According to J.P. Kent, postponing or abstaining from marriage altogether was a relatively rare occurrence before the years encompassing the Great Famine (527). While the Great Famine, a period of starvation and national instability, lasted from 1845-1851, and was over by the time Joyce published *Dubliners*, the Irish population was still reeling from the six-year crisis (Lowe-Evans 1989: 2). Although the Famine left an estimated one million people dead from starvation, its effect on the living was perhaps greater. Census data recorded in J.P. Kent's article notes that in the year 1851, the last year of the Famine, "11% of Irish adults were never married at 45-54 years of age

³ In 2012, the United Nations sanctioned an investigation into asylums as part of the Committee on Torture. The report returned that admission into the asylums had been originally recorded as "private and voluntary," meaning that no action could be taken against the asylums retroactively (Vatileaks 2015: 22, 6:55).

⁴ Jackson and McGinley make reference to the lyric "all is not sweet, all is not sound," when commenting on the character of Maria in "Clay" (1993: 90). Given Maria's structured life within the laundry and her peculiar social behaviour, and her participation in a child's party game, it is possible that the reference alludes to intellectual disability.

[and] by 1911, this figure had risen to 27% for men and 24% for women⁵” (526). Due to the fact that food was scarce during the Famine, many men and women avoided marriage in an effort to do their part to control the population (Lowe-Evans 1989: 2-3).

The logic for postponing marriage was simple; in a predominantly Catholic country, where birth control was a sin, a marriage was likely to produce children (*Sex in a Cold Climate* 1998: Part 1; Lowe-Evans 1989: 9). Therefore, in order to prevent creating more hungry mouths, singlehood, and by extension abstinence, was a “civic duty” (Lowe-Evans 1989: 3, Kent n.d.: 525). As Mary Lowe-Evans states in the introduction to *Crimes Against Fecundity*, “Marriage patterns and fertility rates altered so drastically in the years following the Famine that thrifty middle-age bachelors and [...] exhausted young mothers, existing side by side, had become stock characters on the Irish scene by the turn of the century” (2). However, while the stereotypical images of the mother and the bachelor that Lowe-Evans presents function as opposites to show both the growth and stunted alteration of the Irish population, the Famine created a cultural mindset of singleness through the fear of starvation and the anxiety of creating a family one had no means to care for (Lowe-Evans 1989: 2-3). In “Clay,” Maria mirrors the idea of spinsterhood as a civic duty, remembering herself as a “young girl... with... a diminutive body which she had so often adorned” (D 85). Maria’s memories, combined with the commentary that “she didn’t want any ring or man either,” support the idea that her unmarried status is not a consequence, but a conscious *decision*⁶ (D 84). As Robert E. Kennedy observes, “Obviously, a great change occurred between 1841 and 1851 in the proportion of Irish persons will-

⁵ In 1936, it was recorded that 74% of Irish men and 55% of the country’s women between the ages of 25 and 34 had not married (Strassman and Clarke 1998: 34). Furthermore, Ireland, today, maintains one of the highest percentages of unmarried individuals (Strassmann and Clarke 1998: 33-34).

⁶ The reliability of Maria’s memory has been called into question several times, with critics arguing that Maria is often coddled, forgetful, and strangely, does not narrate in first person (Norris 1987: 208).

ing to postpone marriage [or abstain from it forever], a change associated with events surrounding the 1845-58 famine” (in Lowe-Evans 1989: 9). Though food was replenished and crops were again planted, the Great Famine forced many into non-traditional circumstances—a fate not forgotten by Joyce.

The fact that the Famine created early spinsters out of the young is critical to understanding the matrimonially ambiguous women that Joyce brings to life. Joyce never directly states why female characters like Eveline, Gretta, and Maria do or do not marry, but the dwindling population and the surge in emigration to America in the six years of the Great Famine creates a logical reason for women to avoid or, at least, alter matrimonial plans⁷. Eveline Hill, for example, prompted by the “pitiful vision of her mother’s life,” comes within mere footsteps of emigration (D 28). However, Eveline is caught between life and death; the promise that Eveline makes her now-deceased mother to “keep the home together as long as she could” stands in direct contrast with what that emigration and marriage represent (D 30). The story ends with an emotionally stunted and indecisive Eveline helplessly “gripp[ing]... the iron [railing] in frenzy” (D 31). Illustrated by Eveline, the Joycean woman finds her roots in reality. As Florence Walzl notes in her article, “*Dubliners*: Women in Irish Society,” “*Dubliners* mirrors Irish social conditions with accuracy and realism” so much so that Joyce described *Dubliners* as “a ‘looking glass’ in which the Irish people could see themselves and their paralysis” (1982: 31-32). Even from the early days of his literary career, Joyce was aware of the toll that the Great Famine had taken on the people of Ireland in a political, economic, and personal way, and reflects that understanding in his own writing (Lowe-Evans 1989: 7-8). *Dubliners* reflects the reality of the time period, even though that truth is billed as fiction (Walzl 1982: 32). In *Dubliners*, much like in 20th century Irish society, “Children are stunted in their development,

⁷ Of the two million people who left Ireland, many were children who may not have survived the anticipated journey to America aboard what were known as “Coffin Ships”—cramped vessels known for spreadable disease and disaster (Moyer 2014: para 7-9).

youths are frustrated socially and economically, and adults are trapped in sterile and unproductive lives” (Walzl 1982: 32). One characteristic, from young adulthood to old age, however, is instrumental in the tribulations of the folk of Dublin—marriage.

The attention to the personal lives of the characters in *Dubliners* offers an interesting angle when viewed in terms of marriage within Irish society in the 20th century. At first glance, the stories may seem to have very little connection, aside from the fact that they all take place in the same city. If examined further, however, the “Two demographic characteristics that recur in Joyce’s works are considered typical of Ireland—postponed marriages and permanent celibacy—first became evident after the Great Famine” (Lowe-Evans 1989: 8). While many scholars have noted the perpetual singleness of many of the male characters in *Dubliners*, like the character of Bob Doran in “The Boarding House,” the female characters are subjected to a perhaps more isolating experience by abandoning matrimony⁸. Though many Irish men and women did put aside marriage in order to better their odds of surviving the national crisis that was the Great Famine, other Irish citizens decided to forgo marriage, and consequently procreation, out of responsibility to land and family. Rates of delayed marriage or permanent celibacy for both sexes were higher after the Famine and these practices were common to both wealthy and more rural areas of Ireland (Kent n.d.: 529). The farming communities, according to Kent, had higher rates of celibacy, as their land holdings and economic success increased (532). While it remains unclear whether the correlation of land girth and agricultural success led to a *causation* of male celibacy, the marital patterns within the rural areas of Ireland cannot be ignored, as many characters in Joyce’s *Dubliners* seem to migrate from rural areas in Ireland to the cosmopolitan capital, Dublin (Kent n.d.: 530-532). Male celibacy was common after the years of the Great Famine, and marital patterns among those who did have children in

⁸ Middle aged and unmarried, Mary Jane Morkan in “The Dead” is supported, begrudgingly, by her male cousin, Gabriel.

the rural community led to a wider discussion of chosen and forced female spinsterhood.

Being a woman in Ireland at the turn of the century was difficult—being the daughter of an Irish farmer at the same time may have been even harder. According to information in Strassmann and Clarke’s article “Ecological Constraints on Marriage in Rural Ireland,” it was a common practice for a father to leave all of his land to one child, regardless of the number, or gender, of his children. The leaving of one’s property to a sole heir is known as creating a “stem-family.” In the division of assets, the inheriting offspring is the only child that obtains the land *and* the right to marry. The non-inheriting children of the farmer, in the stem family method, had two options: either to leave the family home for the possibility of marriage, or continue to live and work on the family farm while remaining single and, presumably, celibate. One of the more common options for adult children, especially females, was to stay on the family property, help with the raising of other siblings or nieces and nephews – and only marry if a dowry could be provided. More commonly, the female sibling continued to live with the inheriting male sibling and his family, therefore becoming the male sibling’s economic responsibility (Strassman and Clarke 1998: 38-41). An example of a possible stem-family in Joyce’s *Dubliners* exists within the Morkan-Conroy family. Of the lineage of Patrick Morkan, only one daughter, Ellen, goes on to have a family of her own, leaving unmarried Julia and Kate seemingly dependent upon their brother, Pat. After the death of their brother, Julia and Kate move to Dublin along with Pat’s unmarried daughter, Mary Jane, from Stonyebatter⁹ (Jackson and McGinley 1993: 163). In Dublin, the Morkan women become economically dependent upon Gabriel Conroy, the only living, and adult, male relative of which the reader is aware. Even Maria from Joyce’s “Clay” seems to have lived in a stem-family situation, though she may not have had any direct relation to the Donnelly

⁹ While not particularly a rural area today, the word “batter” was a descriptor for an “ancient road” in earlier times (Haliday and Prendergast 1881: 222 f1).

family. As it was not uncommon for unmarried women to attach themselves to families as a nanny, Maria's memory that a young Joe used to say, "Mama is Mama, but Maria is my proper mother," makes sense (D 83). Furthermore, the fact that Maria now has a position at a laundry is indicative of that former role. According to Marian Eide, laundries were often places where "women might reside and work between engagements as nannies and housemaids" (63). Knowing that Maria still has a relationship with the Donnelly's, and it is likely that they have arranged her residence at the laundry through their own social connections, it seems that the stem-family arrangement was successful, both in literature and historically (Jackson and McGinley 1993: 89).

In the first half of this essay, spinsterhood has been discussed as a product of both the economic and agricultural environments of Ireland within the 20th century. However, a more sinister reason for the vast quantities of unmarried women is to be found with the Catholic Church and a strict society. The remnants of the Victorian era dictated cultural mores where the expression of sexuality, especially by a female, was forbidden. Instead of embracing sexuality in a nonchalant way, as had been the norm in earlier centuries, "Silence became the rule [regarding anything of a sexual nature]. The legitimate and procreative couple, laid down the law" (Foucault 1977: 3). Foucault's reference to the "legitimate couple" as the only rightful signifier of any intimate behavior plays into the idea adopted very quickly by Irish society during, and even prior to, the 20th century—that of reforming those who had embraced sexuality illegitimately (Foucault 1977: 3). Even though societal containment of sexuality has created a divide between those who adhere to the moral expectations of the community and those who do not, the accepted role for a woman was defined by her marital status. As Smith highlights, "identity for Irish women [was constructed] solely in domestic terms—women were mothers, women were wives" (qtd. 3). The contrast between Molly Ivors, the unmarried woman who socially unnerves Gabriel Conroy, and his wife, Gretta, in "The Dead," illustrates this domestic divide. By constricting sexuality to the home and only acknowledging women who stayed within that

realm, Irish society had created a system by which those who did not conform to those strict standards could be identified and reformed. By the 20th century, Ireland had fully implemented institutions of reform known as Magdalen Asylums, or Magdalen laundries¹⁰ into the working of Irish society (Finnegan 2004: 1-4). The original purpose of Magdalen Asylums was to rehabilitate what Frances Finnegan calls “first fall” prostitutes (8). In later years, the Asylums accepted unwed mothers, women who were mentally ill, and girls who *might* mature into sexually irresponsible women if left unchecked¹¹ (Finnegan 2004: 8). Indeed, throughout the 20th century, Magdalen Asylums became less about charity and more about punishment for breaching sexual norms.

In any society, nonconformance to the ideals of the majority has repercussions, but for the unmarried Irish women who bore illegitimate children, the punishment was severe. Even though Magdalen Asylums started out as a place of reform and refuge for prostitutes, the admission criteria soon included women who had become pregnant via consensual sex, coercion, incest, and rape (Smith 2007: 13-14). Due to the inability to hide the obvious signs of a growing fetus, the woman took the brunt of the punishment (Smith 2007: 40-41). Regardless of the fact that a man had an equal part in creating the child, the father suffered no repercussion because nothing could definitively tie him to the child. Therefore, when a woman made an accusation of a sexual nature against a man, the most convenient thing to do, especially if the accused male was family, was to hide the female in a Magdalen Asylum. As James Smith explains, “The Irish... male [was] not held accountable in the same manner as [a female]... he avoid[ed] institutionalization and live[d] his life unrestrained” (41). As unfair as it may be, the ramifications of an unintended pregnancy landed less on the father and more on the expectant mother’s family. It is under-

¹⁰ The Magdalen Laundries were named after Mary Magdalene, the prostitute in the Bible who repented of her sexually immoral ways; she was given the task of revealing Jesus’ resurrection to the Apostles.

¹¹ The term “first fall prostitute” refers to the fact that the woman is not a repeat offender in terms of prostitution.

standable, then, that an illegitimate pregnancy would be kept quiet. While none of Joycean women have openly done penance in a Magdalen Asylum, Jolanta Wawrzycka has argued that Gretta Conroy's relationship with Michael Furey may have been physical, as well as emotional (70). When Gabriel asks if she loved Furey, Gretta only responds that she "was great with him at that time," which could allude to the physicality of a pregnancy that is beginning to show (D 191). Combined with the fact that Gretta's last memory of Furey takes place on the night before she is to depart for a convent, a curious reader may wonder if this convent could have been a euphemism for a Magdalen Asylum that Gretta was sent to by an ashamed family.

Being a family of good standing in 20th century Ireland was of great importance—especially to the patriarch of a well-established family. However, a chain is only as strong as its weakest link as the saying goes, and a family's reputation could be ruined by the indiscretion of a single person. As Christina Mulcahey, a former Magdalen, stated in an interview given in the documentary *Sex in a Cold Climate*, after giving birth to her child she returned to her family home only to be told by her father: "you're not coming into this house" (Part 1). Having been rejected by their families, many fallen women had no choice but to either allow themselves to be institutionalized. Being in a Magdalen Asylum however, meant no timeline for freedom. Mary O'Connor Merritt, who spent fourteen years in an asylum, noted that "she wouldn't have gotten fourteen years for murder," but she was forced to serve that time for being considered a sexual risk to society (Vatileaks 2015: 13:34). O'Connor's sentiments of unjust imprisonment in the asylums are echoed by women like Mary Norris, another former penitent of the asylums. Norris revealed in an interview with *60 Minutes* that she "would have rather been down to the women's jail" (Symun 2015: 2:30). "At least," Norris said, "I'd have gotten a sentence and known when I was leaving" (ibid.). Apart from women like Merritt and Norris though, there were women, as has been recorded by Frances Finnegan in her book *Do Penance or Perish*, who, having been rejected by their families, saw the asylum as a sort of a refuge and became "dependent" upon the monotonous lifestyle that the

Magdalen Asylums offered¹² (4). For those who did manage to leave the asylum, either by escape or by the assistance of a sympathetic relative, the trauma induced by living in a Magdalen Asylum had lifelong effects¹³. While penitents were purposefully limited to singlehood while in the Magdalen Asylums, surviving the asylum did not mean that marriage suddenly became a possibility (*Sex in a Cold Climate*, 1998: Part 3). For many, being deprived of individuality, camaraderie, and simple human contact took a heavy toll that later affected their ability to form a sense of self and a sense of family outside of the asylum. “They shaved my head and I had to wear a uniform,” remembered Elizabeth Coppin who spoke to BEC World (Justice for Magdalens 2014: 10:03-10:43). “Straightaway, [in the Magdalen Asylum] your identity is taken because my name’s taken, my hair cut and I’m not wearing my own clothes. I have to answer to the name Enda—which is a man’s name,”¹⁴ Coppin noted (Justice for Magdalens 2014: 10:03-10:34). Even if no one knew about their past, many former Magdalen penitents were unable to shake off the sense of sin that had been associated with their identity for so long (*Sex in a Cold Climate* 1998: Part 3). Failed marriages and intentionally staying single seems to be common among women who once lived behind the Magdalen walls; “You can’t fall into that marriage... it [the damage done by the asylums] haunts ya,” noted Magdalen orphan, Bridgid Young¹⁵ (*Sex in*

¹² The Magdalen worked in the laundry six days a week, nine hours a day. Being tasked with cleansing soiled linen was a metaphor for personal atonement. (Smith 2007: 37-38, *Sex in a Cold Climate*).

¹³ A woman could be released from a Magdalen Asylum and into the care of a male family member. In many cases, though, the patriarchal members of the family were the ones who had placed the female in the institution in the first place (*Sex in a Cold Climate* 1998: Part 3).

¹⁴ It was not uncommon for penitents to have their names changed against their will. The logic behind imposing a masculine name was likely intended to remove their femininity (Rafferty 2011: para. 8).

¹⁵ In most Magdalen Asylums, there was an orphanage attached to the laundries where the babies of the laundresses were kept prior to adoption. Physical and sexual abuse of the orphans by both the clergy and the nuns was not uncommon (*Sex in a Cold Climate* 1998: Part 3).

a Cold Climate 1998: Part 3). While leaving a Magdalen Asylum seldom meant real “escape,” the women described above had an idea of why they had been incarcerated: they had been sexually promiscuous and usually produced a child. For many of the Magdalen penitents, however, their only crime wasn’t a crime at all—it was only the fact that they had the *potential* to become a sexual liability.

The fear of wanton sexuality spawned the need to control the image of the Irish woman—for it was far better that she ended up a spinster than a loose woman. While, according to Strassmann and Clarke, “less than 4% of all Irish births occurred outside [of] marriage [for] each decade from 1871-1966,” there was a need to somehow police the women of Ireland to ensure that the sanctity of the family was kept intact—even if that sanctity was paper thin (34). The social anxiety that surrounded females as regard to the expression of sexuality created an overly sensitive public that saw the Magdalen Asylums as a preventative measure instead of the restorative structure that it had originally been meant to be. In order to create a façade of social harmony, girls who were considered to be at risk based on any display of inappropriate sexual behavior were sent to the asylums along with the women who were pregnant. Even if she was not pregnant, Gretta Conroy, who remembers that Furey was “very fond” of her, could have been a preventative penitent in the asylums (D 192). Indeed, Phyllis Valentine, an Irish woman who spent eight years in a Magdalen asylum in the mid-20th century, reported that while Irish girls were “taught to be pretty,” being attractive, especially as a girl blossoming into womanhood, had a great disadvantage (*Sex in a Cold Climate* 1998: Part 2). Though Valentine had not engaged in any unsavory behavior, she was told by a nun that she was “pretty as a picture” and that she had been sent to the institution because her guardians were “afraid [she’d] fall away” (*Sex in a Cold Climate* 1998: Part 2).

The hyper-sensitive society that Irish females, like Phyllis Valentine, lived in was conditioned by seeing sexuality as a deviant trait that needed to be removed from the person, and the community as a whole. Therefore, as has been noted above, the sequestering of these women to prevent them from sexual expression created something of

an unforeseen epidemic in terms of marriage and the production of children. For those women who were eventually liberated from the Magdalen Asylums, sex even inside the bounds of wedlock was a challenge due to the mental and physical abuse that they had endured – which created more spinsters, divorced women and emotionally stunted women. Martha Cooney, a former Magdalen penitent also interviewed in the documentary *Sex in a Cold Climate*, noted that her subservient experience in the asylum influenced her decision not to marry as she, “never wanted anyone to have power over me” (Part 3).

While 21st century Irish society is sympathetically aware of the fact that the Magdalens themselves were not to blame for their incarceration, there is very little that the Irish government can do to seek retribution for these women (Justice for Magdalens 2014: 22:15). Indeed, according to Irish politician, Joan Burton, who is herself a daughter of a Magdalen penitent, the United Nations investigation into the inner workings of the Magdalen Laundries served more as “recognition for what women had experienced and what women had gone through” than any sort of legal or national action taken on their behalf (Justice for Magdalens 2014: 19:47). While the presence of, and ensuing emotional damage created by, the Magdalen Asylums cannot bear the entire brunt for the depictions of spinsterhood in James Joyce’s *Dubliners*, the fact remains that from 1904 to 1914, when *Dubliners* was written and published, the Magdalen Asylums were in full operation which, when considered in conjunction with the amount of spinsters in the stories, creates a correlation that deserves investigation.

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