

## Clay



## INTRODUCTION

## BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JAMES JOYCE

James Joyce was born to Irish Catholic parents and grew up in Rathgar, a suburb of Dublin. He received a Jesuit education and eventually earned a degree in modern languages from University College, Dublin. After graduating in 1902, he moved to Paris and briefly studied medicine, but he soon returned home to Dublin in 1903 due to his mother's illness. During this visit, he met Nora Barnacle, a woman from Galway with whom he would spend the rest of his life (although they did not marry until 1931). Dissatisfied with the political and religious turmoil in his country during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Joyce went into self-imposed exile, visiting Dublin only four times throughout the rest of his life and living in various European cities, including Trieste, Pola, and Zürich. Joyce's first major work was a collection of short stories called *Dubliners* (1914). As he continued to write, Joyce received guidance from American poet Ezra Pound, who was eventually responsible for the publication of Joyce's novels [A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man](#) (1916) and *Ulysses* (1922). Joyce was known for his innovative modernist writing style, which became increasingly esoteric over the course of his writing career. Some consider the realism and free indirect discourse in *Dubliners* to be a trial run for Joyce's more avant-garde stream-of-consciousness prose in *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939). In 1941, Joyce died in Zürich, Switzerland after undergoing surgery for an ulcer.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Joyce lived and wrote during a time of great political and religious conflict in Ireland, an era when Irish Nationalism—the movement to free Ireland from British rule—was on the rise. This also came in the wake of the Irish Literary Revival, a literary movement that was related to Irish Nationalism in its celebration of Irish heritage and culture. Joyce's focus on the day-to-day experience of Irish people reflects the influence of the Irish Literary Revival, as well as the growing importance of Irish Nationalism as a political force. Most (though not all) Irish Nationalists were Catholic, since part of rejecting England's rule was resisting the influence of British Protestantism, which gave the small number of Protestants in Ireland wealth and power. The majority of the Irish population was Catholic and impoverished, which inspired Joyce's depiction of Irish Catholics' dreary lives in *Dubliners*. Joyce, disillusioned by the conflict in his country, went into a self-imposed exile after earning his degree, returning to Ireland only a small handful of times throughout the rest of his life.

## RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"Clay" appears in Joyce's collection *Dubliners*. Notably, "Clay" is one of only a few stories in the collection that feature women prominently; others include "Eveline," "A Mother," and "The Boarding House." Joyce became famous for his esoteric stream-of-consciousness writing style, which shows up in perhaps a subtler form in *Dubliners* than it does in his later novels, *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. Many authors writing around the same time as Joyce used free indirect discourse in ways similar to Joyce: Virginia Woolf used it in her novels [To the Lighthouse](#) and *Mrs. Dalloway*, as did Gustave Flaubert in his novel [Madame Bovary](#). *Mrs. Dalloway* bears particular resemblance to "Clay"; not only do both works take place over a single day (as do many of Joyce's other works), but they also follow the struggles and revelations of female protagonists as they travel through their respective cities. Additionally, Joyce found the work of playwright Henrik Ibsen inspiring and wrote a review of Ibsen's play *When We Dead Awaken*. Like "Clay," the play portrays characters who are unfulfilled and struggling to find meaning in life as they grow older.

## KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Clay
- **When Written:** 1905-1906
- **Where Written:** Zürich, Switzerland; Trieste, Austria-Hungary (now in Italy); Pola, Austria-Hungary (now known as Pula, Croatia)
- **When Published:** 1914
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Short story; modernism; realism; symbolism
- **Setting:** Dublin, Ireland
- **Climax:** Maria places her hand on a lump of clay in a Halloween game
- **Antagonist:** Maria's loneliness and insecurity
- **Point of View:** Third person limited, with use of free indirect discourse (i.e., Joyce narrates from Maria's perspective)

## EXTRA CREDIT

**Publication.** Joyce fought an almost decade-long battle to publish *Dubliners*, since several publishers considered its scandalous sexual content and its dismal portrayal of Dublin life to be unprintable.

**Revisions.** "Clay" went through many iterations as Joyce wrote the story between 1905 and 1906. It was originally going to take place on Christmas Eve, rather than Halloween. Joyce

later changed the holiday and went through multiple titles before finally settling on the simple “Clay.”



## PLOT SUMMARY

Maria, a middle-aged unmarried woman working at a charitable laundry in Dublin, finishes her workday while thinking about her excitement to go out that evening. She prepares for the women’s tea, which is her last task of the day before going to celebrate Hallow Eve with her friend Joe Donnelly’s family. Maria cared for Joe when he was a boy, and he considers her a second mother. While he has repeatedly asked her to come live with him, Maria is used to her life at the laundry and she always declines.

At the laundry, Maria is generally well-liked for her kindness and her ability to diffuse conflicts; the matron of the laundry describes her as a “peace-maker.” As the women file in for tea, Maria serves them tea and slices of barmbrack, a traditional Hallow Eve cake. Amidst much “laughing and joking,” two of the women make jokes about Maria’s age and lack of a husband. Maria joins in on the laughter, despite her “disappointed shyness” and discomfort.

Finally finished with her evening’s work and able to escape the women’s banter, Maria goes into her bedroom to change her clothes in preparation for the Donnellys’ Hallow Eve event. Seeing her body in the mirror, she thinks fondly of how it used to look and admires its current appearance, too.

Maria takes a Dublin tram to a cake shop, in which she buys a bag of many small cakes for the Donnelly children. She then goes to a second shop, hoping to find a special treat for Joe and Mrs. Donnelly. The woman behind the counter in the second shop is annoyed that Maria is slow in choosing a cake, so she cruelly asks if Maria is buying a wedding cake. Maria is embarrassed, but she shrugs it off and leaves with a slice of plum cake.

On her crowded tram ride from the second cake shop to the Donnellys’ home, an elderly man offers Maria a seat. He makes pleasant conversation with her about the cakes she is carrying and how nice it is to spoil children with treats, and Maria seems to enjoy his company.

Having finally reached her destination, Maria receives a warm welcome from the Donnellys and presents the Donnelly children, as well as two girls who live next door and have come for the holiday festivities, with their cakes. Unable to find the plum cake she bought for Joe and his wife, Maria concludes that the elderly man left her so “confused” that she must have lost the cake on the tram. This revelation makes her feel “shame and vexation and disappointment.” Joe assures Maria that her losing the cake is not a problem.

Casual conversation and holiday festivities begin. Joe tells Maria a story about his boss that Maria does not understand;

she does not ask for clarification, but she tries to express sympathy and understanding anyway. Soon after, Maria raises the topic of Joe’s falling out with his brother Alphy and suggests that they try to reconnect. Mrs. Donnelly agrees with Maria, but Joe refuses to discuss the topic and ends the conversation.

The two next-door girls organize Hallow Eve games for the group. In one game, each person is **blindfolded** and has to place their hand on an object that will represent their fate. One of the girls plays and finds a **ring**, which represents upcoming marriage. The group then coaxes Maria into playing, and she picks a lump of **clay**, which symbolizes impending death. The group whispers uncomfortably as Maria, confused and blindfolded, stands with her hand still on the clay. Without acknowledging what has just happened, she intuits that she should choose a different object, so she places her hand on a Bible, which signifies entrance into a convent.

At the end of the evening, Mrs. Donnelly encourages Maria to sing for the group before the children go to bed. While Maria is hesitant, she sings an aria. After singing the first verse, about dreaming of wealth and luxury, Maria fails to move on to the second verse, about dreaming of suitors and love, repeating the first verse instead. No one says anything about her repetition, but Joe’s eyes tear up, as he seems to recognize her suffering.



## CHARACTERS

**Maria** – Maria, the protagonist of “Clay,” is an unmarried middle-aged woman working at a laundry in Dublin. While she is well-liked at work and known as a “peace-maker,” her interactions with others are superficial and even painful, as she is often mocked for being unmarried. Her only close friend is Joe Donnelly, whom she nursed when he was a child, and who is now married with a family. While he invites Maria to live with his family, she refuses, insisting that she is used to her life at the laundry. Throughout the story, Maria often says or thinks one thing while feeling something entirely different. When other people make her uncomfortable, for instance, she tends to force herself to laugh, thereby hiding her feelings from others. What’s more is that she hides her own feelings from herself, insisting that her independence is actually better than being married (even though she badly wants to be married), or that she loves her life at the laundry (when there are actually aspects she finds uncomfortable). Maria’s inability to acknowledge her own feelings is most striking when, at Joe Donnelly’s Hallow Eve party, she plays a game in which, **blindfolded**, she selects a lump of **clay**, a symbol of impending death that seems to affirm her destiny to remain alone. Maria is so unable to cope with this that she doesn’t even acknowledge to herself that the object she touched is clay, which shows her profound denial and loneliness. Ultimately, Maria finds herself paralyzed: alone, unable to admit her own isolation, and

without any hope of real human connection, even with her closest friend.

**Joe Donnelly** – Joe Donnelly, Maria’s closest friend, is the host of the Hallow Eve party at the center of the story. He is the wife of Mrs. Donnelly and the father of several children. Maria has known Joe his whole life, as she cared for him and his brother Alphy when they were young. Joe sees Maria as his “proper mother,” and he tries to help her: he got her the job at the laundry, he invites her to spend time with his family, and he has even repeatedly asked Maria to come live with him, which she refuses to do. While Joe and Maria are certainly close, Joyce does hint at tension in their relationship. Maria implies that Joe has a drinking problem, and she laments that he no longer speaks with his brother. Furthermore, although Joe tries to include Maria in the festivities, his efforts often make her uncomfortable. When he talks to her, for example, she sometimes doesn’t understand the point of his stories, and he pressures her to participate in games and sing an aria for the group, which she would rather not do. Joe seems aware that Maria’s life has not been all that she hoped, and the story’s final moment—when Joe tears up watching Maria sing—shows that, while he cares deeply for Maria and sees that she is suffering, he is ultimately unable to provide the healing she needs.

**Mrs. Donnelly** – Mrs. Donnelly is Joe’s wife, who is unfailingly kind to Maria. On Hallow Eve, Mrs. Donnelly defends Maria’s assertion that Joe and Alphy should reconnect, and she scolds the next-door girls for bringing the **clay** that humiliates Maria during the game. Despite Mrs. Donnelly’s genuine kindness, she doesn’t always understand Maria. She offers Maria port wine, for instance, even though Maria hates drinking, and when she encourages Maria to sing for the family, it makes Maria uncomfortable (although Maria does what Mrs. Donnelly asks anyway).

**Alphy Donnelly** – Alphy Donnelly is Joe Donnelly’s brother, with whom Joe—for unspecified reasons—no longer speaks. Maria cared for both Alphy and Joe when they were children, and it’s implied that she still speaks with Alphy, since she tries to “put in a good word for him” with Joe at the Hallow Eve party. Joe is enraged when Maria suggests that he and Alphy reconcile, so Maria drops the matter, but she does say that the brothers were close as children, and it’s implied that Joe’s oldest son, Alphy, is named for him.

**Next-Door Girls** – These two girls live next door to Joe and Mrs. Donnelly, and they (along with the four Donnelly children) are present during the Hallow Eve festivities. The girls organize holiday games for the group, including the final game in which blindfolded players must select an object that will determine their fate. During the game, one of the girls selects a **ring**, which symbolizes upcoming marriage, prompting a playful reaction from Mrs. Donnelly. This moment represents the promise and expectation of marriage for a young woman, as well as the mutual understanding that exists between young women who

are eligible for marriage and older married women. Maria, however, finds herself on the outside of this, unable to connect with other women in the way they connect with each other. When Maria selects the lump of clay (symbolizing death), Mrs. Donnelly scolds the girls for bringing the clay, implying that this wasn’t appropriate.

**Elderly Man** – While Maria takes the tram to the Donnellys’ house, an elderly man gives up his seat to her and talks to her throughout the ride. Maria initially describes this interaction in positive terms: he is kind in giving up his seat, and she remarks on how easy it is to connect with him. However, when she realizes that she left her slice of plum cake on the tram because their conversation made her “confused,” she reveals that this interaction was actually incredibly uncomfortable for her. Maria implies that the man was drunk (which she hates), and remembering their conversation makes her feel “shame and vexation and disappointment,” leaving her on the verge of tears. It’s clear that, actually, Maria had an uncomfortable conversation with a drunk stranger on the bus and—despite it being so disorienting to her that she left her cake on the bus—she forced herself to continue their polite conversation until she got off. That Maria not only wouldn’t show her true feelings to the man (whom she humored with polite conversation), but also wouldn’t even admit to *herself* how uncomfortable she was, shows the extent of her instinct to repress anything unpleasant and pretend that everything is okay.

**Woman Behind the Shop Counter** – The young woman behind the shop counter is the person who rings up the plum cake that Maria buys for Joe and Mrs. Donnelly. When Maria takes a long time to pick out what she wants, it annoys the woman, who cruelly suggests that Maria might be buying a wedding cake. Maria likely finds this comment a harsh reminder that she is unmarried, but she doesn’t acknowledge this; instead, she simply “blush[es] and smile[s]” and moves on. The woman’s “stylish” appearance suggests that she is attractive to men and eligible for marriage, which draws further attention to Maria’s misfortune.

## TERMS

**Barmbrack** – Barmbrack is a sweet bread served on Hallow Eve in Ireland. According to Irish holiday tradition, each bread should contain an object that represents the future of the person who finds it. One of these objects is a **ring**, which symbolizes upcoming marriage. When **Maria** serves tea on Hallow Eve, one of the women jokes that Maria might find a ring in her slice of barmbrack. The joke makes Maria uncomfortable, but she laughs it off.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



## LONELINESS AND ESTRANGEMENT

In “Clay,” an unmarried middle-aged woman named Maria struggles to connect with others. Maria is surrounded by people at work, and she speaks with strangers when she is out in the city, but these interactions are mostly superficial. Furthermore, Maria feels distance even with her closest friend, Joe Donnelly, a man whom she took care of when he was young, who still treats her like part of his family. Throughout the story, Maria faces teasing about being single, she struggles to support herself with low wages, and she often seems bewildered in the presence of others, making her an easy target for manipulation and cruelty. By depicting a day in Maria's life, Joyce shows the difficulty of aging as a single woman, suggesting that no matter how kind Maria is, she (and other women like her) will struggle to fit in.

While Maria never says outright how lonely she is, the story is riddled with signs of her unhappiness. This is perhaps clearest when she is teased for being single. Near the beginning of the story, a woman named Lizzie Fleming jokes that Maria will “get the **ring**” (a reference to an Irish game in which a **blindfolded** person selects an object that represents their future). Maria pretends to be lighthearted, saying she wants neither a ring nor a husband, but her laughter is forced and her eyes reflect “disappointed shyness.” It is clear that this has hurt Maria, and that she does wish that she were married.

Maria's loneliness stems from more than being single; her relationships with friends and acquaintances seem shallow. In her job at a laundry that serves at-risk women, for example, Maria is known as the “peace-maker,” skilled at diffusing arguments and putting the women at ease. While this indicates that Maria is socially adept, her pleasantness seems to only earn superficial praise. The others toast to her health and compliment her work ethic, but Joyce never shows her having a deeper interaction at work—in fact, she mostly seems uncomfortable and eager for the time to pass.

Maria's best chance at genuine connection is with Joe Donnelly, a man who regards her as something of a second mother and invites her to celebrate Halloween with his family. Even with him, though, Maria struggles to connect. His drinking makes her uncomfortable, he will not take her advice to reconcile with his brother, and, Maria reveals early in the story, she once refused his offer to live with him because she felt she would be “in the way.” As much as she wants to feel part of his family,

then, it seems that she knows she is not.

Despite Maria's desire—and efforts—to connect with others, Joyce implies that Maria will be alone forever. One indication that Maria will remain lonely is the failure of her attempts to connect with the Donnelly family. She buys them an expensive slice of plum cake, for example, as a way to repay their kindness in inviting her to their party, but then she accidentally leaves the cake on the bus. This “failure of her little surprise” leads optimistic Maria to become, for the only time in the story, outwardly distressed: she feels “shame and vexation and disappointment” that almost make her cry. To bring a piece of cake to a party is an uncomplicated gesture; that even this simple attempt to connect with others fails suggests that Maria's future, like this moment, will continue to be lonely and painful.

Joyce's clearest indication that Maria will be lonely forever comes during a Halloween game in which she is blindfolded and chooses an object to represent her future. Maria first selects a lump of **clay**, which symbolizes impending death. The Donnellys encourage her to try again, and she chooses a bible, which signifies entering a convent (notably, a life in which women never marry). Ironically, Maria only decided to play this game to feel closer to the Donnellys, but this attempt at connection backfires, since the symbolism of the game only reaffirms that she will remain alone.

Joyce cements the impression that Maria's loneliness will be lasting at the story's end when she agrees to sing an aria. As she sings, Maria accidentally repeats the first verse—about dreaming of wealth—rather than moving onto the second verse, which is explicitly about dreaming of love. That Maria omits the verse about love suggests her inability to imagine a future in which she is not alone. Furthermore, the fact that nobody at the party points out her mistake suggests that they, too, understand that she will never marry and that her loneliness will never get better. Maria's superficial interactions, coupled with her inability to connect with others even when she tries, suggest that her loneliness is irresolvable. Ultimately, Joyce uses Maria's loneliness to depict the plight of middle-aged unmarried women; not only is Maria's loneliness hopeless, but everyone around Maria (including the women at the laundry and the Donnellys) understands this hopelessness and finds it too sad to explain it to her. In “Clay,” then, Joyce offers a glimpse of the isolation and sadness of growing older as a single woman.



## SADNESS AND REPRESSION

In narrating Maria's thoughts, Joyce shows a woman striving to see the positive: she likes the community at the laundry where she works, she has a greenhouse full of lovely plants, and she is delighted to visit Joe Donnelly and his family for Halloween. But despite Maria's attempts to be cheerful, it is clear that her life is

difficult, particularly as an unmarried woman in a society that sees marriage as a woman's ultimate fulfillment. Throughout the story, Maria's narration is unreliable: she often says one thing but means another, which reflects her attempts to deny and repress her own sadness. Maria's struggle to remain optimistic about her lonely life leaves a tragic implication: that in the absence of real opportunity for happiness, all Maria can do is deny reality and try to convince herself that she is already okay.

Maria is constantly hiding her true feelings from herself and others. At the beginning of the story, for example, one of the women at the laundry wishes aloud that she had a drink, which Maria finds inappropriate. Instead of criticizing her, though, Maria forces herself to laugh in order to convince others that she is not offended. Furthermore, she thinks to herself that the woman meant well, rather than admitting to herself that she is uncomfortable. This self-delusion is more extreme when an elderly man gives Maria his seat on the bus. Maria implies in passing that he is drunk ("he has a drop taken"), and she later admits that he made her so "confused" that she accidentally left a bag of plum cake on the bus. Clearly, this was an uncomfortable interaction with a drunk stranger, but it is noteworthy that she initially describes it in positive terms: he is "nice" and "polite" and "smil[ing]," and she talks with him throughout the bus ride, suggesting that he was "easy [...] to know." This means that, not only was she unwilling to reveal to him how she felt, but even in her private thoughts, she has trouble acknowledging that this interaction was unpleasant.

Maria even does this with Joe Donnelly, the person in the story to whom she feels closest. When she visits his home, he pulls her aside and tells her a story about his office that she does not understand. She tries awkwardly to respond, and reflects that Joe was "very nice" to her, seemingly just for making the effort to talk to her. Maria seems so desperate to connect with someone that she cannot admit even to herself that they are not understanding one another in this moment.

While these incidents are all minor, the story's climax shows the most jarring and extreme instance of Maria's denial. At the Donnellys', Maria plays a Hallow Eve game in which, **blindfolded**, she selects an object that represents her fate: a lump of **clay**, which signifies impending death. Any reasonable person who is familiar with the game would immediately know they had touched clay, but Maria—despite her familiarity with the game—refuses to acknowledge what has happened. She never names what she touches (calling it simply a "soft wet substance"), which allows her to avoid acknowledging the clay's symbolism. Furthermore, even though the others in the room fall silent after she selects the clay and then whisper furiously to one another, Maria does not acknowledge or interpret their odd behavior—she merely registers that her choice was "wrong" and selects another object. By refusing to name the clay or acknowledge the reaction of others, Maria

remains—against all odds—in denial about a clear and simple reality. This moment shows the startling power of Maria's repression. When faced with a sign that she will be alone forever (even from an innocuous children's game), Maria chooses to deny its existence, presumably because processing its meaning would be too painful. In this moment, it seems clear that Maria's powerful ability to repress unpleasantness comes from her inability to admit that she is probably fated to remain alone.

At the end of her evening at the Donnellys', Maria sings an aria for the group—but she repeats the first verse (about dreaming of wealth) instead of singing the second (about dreaming of love and suitors). Maria clearly does dream of love, but she has buried this emotion so deep that she cannot even sing an aria about someone else feeling it. It is an obvious sign—to the reader and to everyone at the Donnellys'—that her repression remains entrenched. It is noteworthy, though, that because Maria cannot speak of her pain and shame, others around her are forced into a similar silence, one that echoes her own repression. After the aria, Joyce notes that nobody in the room points out Maria's mistake, implying that they understand the emotional significance of the moment but cannot speak about it. Joe Donnelly is moved to tears, seemingly because he is so sad for Maria, but instead of saying so, he pours himself a drink. This has been true of other characters, too: earlier, one of the women at the laundry made a joke about Maria's being single (perhaps because she could not straightforwardly express her concern), and Joyce himself goes silent out of respect for Maria. He never once uses the word "clay" in the story, naming only in the title what Maria refuses to acknowledge.



## PARALYSIS AND STAGNATION

Throughout "Clay," Maria's life remains remarkably stagnant. Her job at the laundry is monotonous, and Joyce suggests that she will never leave it—after all, she refuses to go live with her close friend Joe Donnelly, since she is "accustomed" to her life as it is. In addition to not making big changes in her life, Maria seems unable to make small ones. Although the people around her constantly make her uncomfortable, for instance, she never stands up for herself—instead, she simply allows these incidents to recur. Joyce implies that, even though Maria's life is repetitive and dismal, she has become so paralyzed that she can do nothing to change her fate.

Throughout the story, Maria accepts the mockery and scrutiny that she faces as an unmarried middle-aged woman, rather than trying to improve her life by standing up for herself. For instance, when a woman at the laundry ridicules Maria by suggesting that she will find a **ring** (signifying an upcoming marriage) in her slice of cake, Maria laughs "with disappointed shyness." This shows that, while she feels hurt, she cannot bring herself to tell the other women that they are upsetting

her—even if that would make her life better. Similarly, while Maria is buying a slice of plum cake for the Donnellys, the woman behind the shop counter mockingly suggests that Maria might be buying a wedding cake. Instead of defending herself or pointing out the woman’s rudeness, Maria simply “blush[es] and smile[s]” and brushes it off. This shows an unchanging pattern of Maria’s simply accepting unpleasantness, rather than finding the courage to change the way others treat her.

While it is difficult to stand up to mockery or hostility, Maria’s paralysis is also apparent in the company of people who love and support her. This shows how entrenched her passivity and stagnation are. For example, at the beginning of the story, Maria notes that Joe Donnelly—her closest friend in the world, whom she cared for when he was a child—has “often” asked her to move in with him and his family. It is not totally clear why she refuses. While she suggests that she would be “in the way” at his house, she undermines her own reasoning by noting how nice Mrs. Donnelly, Joe’s wife, is to her. It is likely, actually, that Maria might be of help—she cared for Joe and his brother, after all, so she might be able to care for Joe’s children, too. Maria’s real reason for refusing, it seems, is that she is “too accustomed” to her present life to change it, even for the better.

Maria’s paralysis with the Donnellys is not only apparent in big life changes; she is also unable to ask for what she wants in minor, everyday situations. For instance, the Donnellys “insist” that she participate in the Hallow Eve game, which implies that Maria does not want to play. Her reaction is to laugh—a sign of her discomfort—and participate just as they wish. Similarly, at the very end of the story, the Donnellys ask Maria to sing in a way that makes her feel that she “had to.” Instead of expressing her discomfort or suggesting something else, she stands and sings “in a tiny quavering voice,” emphasizing her anxiety and discomfort. By the end of the story, then, Maria is so paralyzed that she cannot even laugh her discomfort away. Instead, she meekly does whatever everyone else wants her to do.

While Maria is playing the Hallow Eve party game (in spite of her desire not to), she selects a lump of **clay**, which symbolizes impending death. In the context of Maria’s life of passivity and stagnation, however, this might represent not literal death—it might simply suggest that her life will stay exactly the same until she dies (the ultimate stagnation). From her general inability to change her life in ways both small and large, it seems that this will inevitably be true, which is a tragedy, since Maria clearly wants change: she wants love, connection to others, more money, and an easier life. But by the end of the story, it is clear that Maria cannot even admit these desires to herself, let alone do anything to make them happen.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



### RINGS

Throughout “Clay,” the characters play Hallow Eve games in which they select objects that are supposed to foretell their future. In these games, selecting a ring symbolizes a coming marriage—but for Maria, rings symbolize a future that she wants, but which is out of reach. While most of the characters in the story see the straightforward association between rings and marriage and think no more of it, for Maria, a ring represents the marriage (and therefore the happiness and belonging) that she does not have and perhaps never will. Lonely and sad as she grows older without a husband, Maria clearly longs for the feeling of connection and security that a wedding ring may bring, but her social isolation and her insistent repression of her own feelings make it impossible for her to get what she wants. During a Hallow Eve tea at the laundry, one of the women jokes that Maria might find a ring in her piece of cake. While this woman likely doesn’t mean any harm, this joke is hurtful to Maria, not only because she really does want a husband (though she will not let herself admit it), but also perhaps because the woman’s attitude toward finding a ring is so casual. For her, a ring is a simple representation of marriage and an object in a game, but for Maria, not having a ring is ostracizing and devastating. Later on, at the Donnellys’, one of the next-door girls selects a ring as part of the Hallow Eve game, while Maria selects a lump of **clay**, symbolizing impending death. The contrast between Maria’s and the girl’s selections demonstrates that, while Maria may be surrounded by young women who are eligible for marriage, she herself will likely remain unmarried. Thus, while the ring represents marriage, it also represents a future of happiness and belonging that Maria will not have.



### CLAY

In the Hallow Eve game depicted in the story, finding a lump of clay symbolizes a player’s impending death. However, for Maria—who finds herself in the unfortunate position of selecting the clay—this may not represent literal death, but instead the death of her dreams for the future and the total stagnation of her life. While Maria wants to feel a sense of belonging (both through marriage and through connections to friends), she struggles throughout the story to acknowledge these desires, let alone to act on them. Because she is so hesitant to ever admit what she wants, it seems that her life might never change for the better (this is apparent in her refusal to live with Joe Donnelly, even though he repeatedly invites her and it seems as though she might like

to accept). It is in this context that Maria selects the clay, which—although it foretells death—seems unlikely to point to Maria’s literal death. Maria, after all, examines her body earlier in the story and suggests that, even if she’s aging, she’s still perfectly healthy. Instead, the clay seems to suggest that, figuratively, her hopes for the future have died, and her life will continue on exactly as it is until the end. If Maria were able to articulate her desires and act on them to try to change her life, then she might have hope for the future. However, Joyce emphasizes the unlikelihood of this when Maria cannot even acknowledge that she has selected the clay: she never names it, instead thinking of it merely as a “soft wet substance,” which shows her inability to admit to her own unhappiness, an essential step in changing her life for the better. Her selection of the clay, alongside her inability to name it, suggests that her future is likely bleak—her life will continue in the same unhappy manner until she dies.



## BLINDFOLD

In the Hallow Eve game at the Donnelly home, players must blindfold themselves and select an object that supposedly foretells their future. As such, blindfolds are associated with knowing the future, and they demonstrate a person’s powerlessness over fate. The next-door girls are eager to play the Hallow Eve game—presumably, as young women, they are optimistic about what the future holds and therefore they’re happy to put on the blindfold and catch a glimpse of their exciting fate. One of the girls does, indeed, place her hand over a **ring**, which represents upcoming marriage. In contrast, Maria is clearly much less optimistic about her future—she fears that she will be alone forever, and her hesitation to put the blindfold on and play the game may reflect her dread. She probably doesn’t *want* to know what the future holds, since she fears the worst—and, indeed, she selects the **clay**, which represents impending death. Interestingly, once Maria has selected the clay, she doesn’t take off the blindfold. Blindfolded, she refuses to name the clay or admit what it is—she simply refers to it as “a soft wet substance.” Perhaps, then, taking off the blindfold and confronting her fate would be too difficult, so she chooses instead to maintain her denial. In this way, the blindfold both makes it possible to see the future, and to continue to deny that future—but in neither scenario does it seem that Maria would have the power to change her fate. The blindfold, then, shows the players how powerless they are over their destinies, whether those destinies are exciting or too terrible to accept.

## Clay Quotes

☞☞ 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 quarreled over their tubs and always succeeded in making peace. One day the matron had said to her:

—Maria, you are a veritable peace-maker!

And the sub-matron and two of the Board ladies had heard the compliment. And Ginger Mooney was always saying what she wouldn’t do to the dummy who had charge of the irons if it wasn’t for Maria. Everyone was so fond of Maria.

**Related Characters:** Maria

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 95

## Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Maria is introduced as a peaceful, unassuming presence. The women at the laundry seem to rely on her to diffuse conflicts. The quote suggests, however, that their reliance on her may not be in her best interests and that, underneath her pacifying demeanor, she is unhappy. Her role as a “peace-maker” seems to be somewhat of a performance: her “soothing[.]” lines come across as deferential and robotic, as if she is simply saying whatever everyone else wants her to say.

Additionally, the sheer number of times that Maria’s peace-making skills are reiterated here suggests that the story is overcompensating to try to cover up the repressed inner turmoil that lives beneath Maria’s peaceful exterior. The narrator has already established that Maria has “always succeeded in making peace,” but Joyce still feels the need to quote the matron saying the same thing. The pair of conjunctions that follow (“And the sub-matron [...] And Ginger Mooney [...]”) also comes across as a clumsy and anxious attempt to provide as many examples as possible to prove that Maria’s life at the laundry is full of positivity.

The last line of the passage, “Everyone was so fond of Maria,” comes across as redundant and forced, as if the narrator is trying to drive home the point that Maria really is happy and peaceful, despite the fact that she is not. The passage, then, is unreliable in its claims and foreshadows Maria’s deep unhappiness.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *Dubliners* published in 1993.

☝ What a nice evening they would have, all the children singing! Only she hoped that Joe wouldn't come in drunk. He was so different when he took any drink.

**Related Characters:** Joe Donnelly, Maria

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 96

### Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Maria is planning out her trip to the Donnellys' house, excited for her workday to end. The quote uses free indirect discourse, in which the third person narrator expresses Maria's thoughts directly. This glimpse into Maria's mind reveals her repression of her own discomfort. She wants so badly to connect with Joe and have a "nice evening" with his family that she almost overlooks the fact that his drunkenness makes her very uncomfortable.

The quote also suggests that, even if Maria makes an effort to connect with others, she will never get rid of her loneliness. However perfect an evening with the Donnellys might seem on the surface, the risk of Joe's drunkenness will always be there, preventing Maria from having a comfortable connection with him and leaving her just as lonely as before.

Notably, this quote is the first of many instances in which alcohol makes Maria uncomfortable and prevents her from connecting with people whose company she otherwise might have enjoyed, which ruins her chances of resolving her loneliness.

☝ Often he had wanted her to go and live with them; but she would have felt herself in the way (though Joe's wife was ever so nice with her) and she had become accustomed to the life of the laundry. Joe was a good fellow. She had nursed him and Alphy too; and Joe used often say:

—Mamma is mamma but Maria is my proper mother.

**Related Characters:** Alphy Donnelly, Joe Donnelly, Maria

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 96

### Explanation and Analysis

Here, Maria reflects on her relationship with Joe and on his many offers for her to live with him. While Maria indicates that she refuses to go live with the Donnellys because she

would be in the way, the story's narration suggests that this isn't the case. Joe cares deeply for her—after all, he sees her as a mother figure—and Mrs. Donnelly seems like she would welcome Maria into her home (indicated by her constant kindness). Given this, it's reasonable to assume that Maria would not be in the way, and that she might be inventing an obstacle to moving in with them out of insecurity. Perhaps Maria believes that *nobody* would want her in their home (which she might also believe is why she's unmarried).

Furthermore, the fact that she feels "accustomed" to her current circumstances indicates that her life is monotonous and that she is not growing. She is simply going through the motions of life—as exemplified by her robotically peaceful demeanor described earlier in the story—and she fails to take into account her need for change. Being so accustomed to her current life seems to make her reticent to make a big change, such as moving in with the Donnellys, even if that change would be for the better. This leaves her paralyzed in her current state of loneliness and unhappiness.

☝ There was a great deal of laughing and joking during the meal. Lizzie Fleming said Maria was sure to get the ring and, though Fleming had said that for so many Hallow Eves, Maria had to laugh and say she didn't want any ring or man either; and when she laughed her grey-green eyes sparkled with disappointed shyness and the tip of her nose nearly met the tip of her chin. Then Ginger Mooney lifted up her mug of tea and proposed Maria's health while all the other women clattered with their mugs on the table, and she said she was sorry she hadn't a sup of porter to drink it in. And Maria laughed again till the tip of her nose nearly met the tip of her chin and till her minute body nearly shook itself asunder because she knew that Mooney meant well though, of course, she had the notions of a common woman.

**Related Characters:** Maria

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 97

### Explanation and Analysis

Here, the women at the laundry are having their Hallow Eve tea. Lizzie Fleming's joke references an Irish Hallow Eve tradition in which finding a ring in a piece of barmbrack symbolizes that the person who found it will get married soon. Given the ring's symbolism in Irish tradition, Lizzie is

either mocking Maria's lack of a husband or trying to obliquely raise the issue of Maria's unhappiness without stating it outright—perhaps she thinks that if Maria could acknowledge it, maybe she could make progress. Regardless of whether Lizzie's intent is cruel or benign, it's clear that the ring represents a life of marriage and belonging that Maria seems unable to have, which accounts for Maria's discomfort here. This quote depicts the first of many instances in which Maria laughs off her discomfort, establishing a formula for Maria's behavior over the course of the story: she hears a joke or comment that makes her uncomfortable, and then she laughs until "the tip of her nose nearly met the tip of her chin." Her "disappointed shyness" in response to the first joke indicates that she really does want a husband, but she laughs it off.

Her discomfort with the second joke—both because Ginger is mocking her and because of Ginger's request for alcohol, which always makes Maria uncomfortable—prompts Maria to laugh even harder, "till her minute body nearly shook itself asunder." This is almost a violent image of laughter, suggesting not only that Maria's laughing off her discomfort is dangerous and harmful, but also that it gets worse over time. The first time, she simply laughs; the second time, she laughs until it's painful. Therefore, rather than making progress toward asserting herself more, Maria is actually becoming increasingly repressed as the jokes continue, paralyzed in her own inability to speak up for herself.

☛ She arranged in her mind all she was going to do and thought how much better it was to be independent and to have your own money in your pocket. She hoped they would have a nice evening. She was sure they would but she could not help thinking what a pity it was Alphy and Joe were not speaking. They were always falling out now but when they were boys together they used to be the best of friends: but such was life.

**Related Characters:** Joe Donnelly, Alphy Donnelly, Maria

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 98

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote, which uses free indirect discourse, demonstrates Maria's denial of reality, even in her own mind. First, when she says that it's "better" to be independent and have her own money, the word "better" implies that she's measuring her life against what it would

be if she were married. Suggesting that it's "better" for her to be single, though, seems blatantly false—Maria has previously indicated that she does wish she were married, and in this circumstance, she's struggling with money and seems to be trying to comfort herself by thinking that it's better for the money to be hers alone, even if there isn't enough money overall without a man to help. In this way, she seems to be trying to convince herself that this is the life she wants, or that the life she has is better than the alternative, even though she doesn't truly believe that.

Furthermore, Maria denies her feelings about spending the evening with the Donnellys. While she desperately hopes for "a nice evening," she knows deep down that the conflict between Alphy and Joe upsets her. This quote demonstrates the back-and-forth that plays out in her mind between acknowledgement of the brothers' conflict and repression of it: the fact that she concludes her thought by saying that "such was life" suggests that, ultimately, she chooses to repress the negativity in the Donnelly family and, therefore, to repress her own discomfort with it.

☛ Here she was a long time in suiting herself and the stylish young lady behind the counter, who was evidently a little annoyed by her, asked her was it wedding-cake she wanted to buy. That made Maria blush and smile at the young lady; but the young lady took it all very seriously and finally cut a thick slice of plumcake [...]

**Related Characters:** Woman Behind the Shop Counter, Maria

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 98

### Explanation and Analysis

Here, Maria is shopping for a special treat to bring to the Donnellys' house for Hallow Eve. The quote demonstrates Maria's estrangement from younger women throughout the story. The young woman here is "stylish," suggesting that she is attractive to men and eligible for marriage. Maria, by contrast, is an aging, unmarried woman, which makes her a ripe target for the younger woman's ridicule. It's noteworthy that all Maria does to provoke the woman's ire is browse for a long time. Helping Maria is this young woman's job, but she nonetheless feels so annoyed with waiting for Maria to choose a cake that she becomes cruel and hostile, suggesting that Maria is buying wedding cake (and thereby calling attention to the hurtful fact that Maria

is single). Not only is this yet another example of Maria being mocked for not having a husband (leaving her estranged from other women), but it's also another instance of her repression. Rather than expressing her discomfort, she can only "blush" and "smile" to deflect from the painful truth.

●● He was very nice with her, and when she was getting out at the Canal Bridge, she thanked him and bowed, and he bowed to her and raised his hat and smiled agreeably; and while she was going up along the terrace, bending her tiny head under the rain, she thought how easy it was to know a gentleman even when he has a drop taken.

**Related Characters:** Elderly Man , Maria

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 99

### Explanation and Analysis

Here, Maria has just finished talking to an elderly man on her tram ride to the Donnellys' house. He was the only person to make room for her to sit down, and she has seemed to find him pleasant as they spoke on the bus. However, this quote ultimately proves to be one of the most severe moments of Maria's repression in the story. The interaction is suspiciously positive: Maria thinks of the man as "very nice," a vague description that the narrator often uses when Maria is uncomfortable but trying to see the positive. This suggests that Maria is, in fact, uncomfortable with him. In addition, their "bow[ing]" to one another is a somewhat exaggerated gesture that suggests that Maria is trying to compensate for the fact that she does not know how to handle herself comfortably around him.

Despite the abundance of positive words and phrases—"very nice," "thanked him," "smiled agreeably," "how easy it was to know [him]"—this passage ends on a notably negative note. When the narrator notes that the man "has a drop taken," it implies that the man is drunk. In Maria's thoughts, this detail seems to appear almost in passing, as an unimportant footnote to a pleasant conversation. This, however, is impossible—throughout the story, Maria has repeatedly emphasized how stressful and upsetting she finds alcohol. That she only acknowledges the man's drunkenness at the end, and without further remark, suggests that she is repressing the magnitude of her discomfort with this interaction. This will be confirmed later when she realizes that the interaction frazzled her so much

that she left her cake on the bus.

●● Maria, remembering how confused the gentleman with the greyish moustache had made her, coloured with shame and vexation and disappointment. At the thought of the failure of her little surprise and of the two and fourpence she had thrown away for nothing she nearly cried outright.

**Related Characters:** Elderly Man , Maria

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 99-100

### Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Maria is at the Donnellys' house and she realizes that she left the plum cake—her special gift for them—on the tram. This passage is noteworthy because it is the story's most overt expression of negative emotion, and it severely rewrites the narrative of Maria's encounter with the drunk old man on the tram. While Maria initially narrated her conversation with the man in positive terms, it's clear in this passage that she was actually so distressed by this interaction—and perhaps in such a hurry to leave the tram—that she accidentally left her plum cake behind. It's a jarring revelation of just how deep Maria's repression can go. Previously, she described their interaction as all smiles and polite conversation, while now she is so ashamed and upset that she wants to cry.

It's also worth examining the word "confused." While "confused" certainly alludes more openly to the negativity of Maria's interaction with the man, it still seems inadequate to describe her emotional state. It seems likely that Maria is, in this moment, *still* repressing as much as she can, choosing the word "confused" because it's somewhat neutral—it acknowledges her disorientation on the bus, which led her to lose the plum cake, without confessing to the more negative feelings she likely had: fear, embarrassment, anger, or discomfort. That Maria's unacknowledged negative emotions left her so frazzled that she forgot her special slice of plum cake shows how her repression has concrete negative consequences on her life. Not acknowledging her feelings or standing up for herself when she's uncomfortable leads not only to emotional distress, but also to actual disorder, as shown when she forgets her plum cake.

☞ He was very nice with her. He told her all that went on in his office, repeating for her a smart answer which he had made to the manager. Maria did not understand why Joe laughed so much over the answer he had made but said that the manager must have been a very overbearing person to deal with.

**Related Characters:** Joe Donnelly, Maria

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 100

### Explanation and Analysis

Here, Maria is at the Donnellys' house talking with Joe. This quote is yet another example of how estranged Maria is from those around her and how unable she is to express her negative emotions. When Maria does not understand Joe's joke about his boss, she cannot admit to her confusion; instead, she simply tries to say something positive, which echoes her previous expression of robotic, almost meaningless positive sentiments at the laundry. Her repression of her own confusion here also mirrors her interaction with the old man on the tram, who was also "very nice with her" and with whom she also expressed positive sentiments in order to mask the fact that she did not understand him. Clearly, this kind of repression is a consistent pattern for Maria.

The quote also indicates the hopelessness of Maria's loneliness. Even with her closest friend, she is confused and uncomfortable and cannot express her true emotions. Therefore, it seems that her social isolation is irresolvable—without being able to be truthful with Joe, they can't have a meaningful conversation. Instead, Joe makes a joke that Maria doesn't understand, and Maria crafts a reply that she thinks is appropriate, but which actually only reveals her to be out of step. They never once connect.

☞ [...] Maria thought she would put in a good word for Alphy. But Joe cried that God might strike him stone dead if ever he spoke a word to his brother again and Maria said she was sorry she had mentioned the matter. Mrs Donnelly told her husband it was a great shame for him to speak that way of his own flesh and blood but Joe said that Alphy was no brother of his and there was nearly being a row on the head of it. But Joe said he would not lose his temper on account of the night it was and asked his wife to open some more stout.

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Donnelly, Joe Donnelly, Alphy Donnelly, Maria

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 100

### Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Maria decides to bring up the subject of Joe's conflict with Alphy. This moment represents perhaps the most pronounced effort on Maria's part to bring about positive change in her life, as the conflict between Joe and Alphy is quite distressing to her, and by raising the topic, Maria is taking a concrete step to fix it. However, Joe makes clear that such a positive change would be impossible, and Maria doesn't press the issue. This shows how easily Maria is overwhelmed by the desires and convictions of others—even if she's pushing for something that's important for her. Readers are left with the impression that, since this effort failed so thoroughly, Maria will probably never become a capable advocate for herself and she will therefore probably not be able to change her life.

This quote also indicates that, in addition to Maria being often in denial, her closest friends are, too. Joe first refuses to acknowledge that he needs to make amends with his brother and then suppresses the whole argument, choosing to have a drink instead. Joe's repression in turn allows Maria's repression to continue to flourish, as Joe's response to this conversation silences her, preventing her from asserting herself and perpetuating her alienation even from her closest friends.

☞ The two next-door girls had arranged some Hallow Eve game and soon everything was merry again [...] The next-door girls put some saucers on the table and then led the children up to the table, blindfold [...] when one of the next-door girls got the ring Mrs Donnelly shook her finger at the blushing girl so much as to say: *O, I know all about it!* They insisted then on blindfolding Maria and leading her up to the table to see what she would get; and, while they were putting on the bandage, Maria laughed and laughed again till the tip of her nose nearly met the tip of her chin.

**Related Characters:** Joe Donnelly, Mrs. Donnelly, Next-Door Girls, Maria

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 100-101

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the whole group (Maria, Joe, Mrs. Donnelly, the Donnelly children, and the two girls from next door) are celebrating Hallow Eve by playing a traditional holiday game. The game involves blindfolding players and having them select objects that will represent their futures. One of the girls from next door places her hand on a ring, which foretells that she will get married soon.

This quote demonstrates Maria's estrangement from the younger women around her. The next-door girls, who are presumably young women with good marriage prospects, arrange the game and are excited to play it, indicating their excitement about finding out their futures. This excitement is reaffirmed when one of them does, in fact, find a ring, suggesting that her future is bright, as marriage is considered a woman's ultimate goal in the society depicted in the story.

Maria, by contrast, is clearly uncomfortable with playing the game (and, implicitly, with learning about her future). This is clear because she has the same reaction to the game as she had when the women at the laundry were joking about her: she "laughed [...] till the tip of her nose nearly met the tip of her chin," which is Maria's telltale response of discomfort. (Notably, Maria's expression of discomfort is simultaneously repression: instead of saying that she doesn't want to play, or using uncomfortable body language, she laughs to try to distract herself and everyone else.) Maria's discomfort with the game suggests that her attitude toward the future is very different from the attitudes of the young women around her. They are optimistic and excited, while she is filled with discomfort and dread, likely because she knows—on some level—that she will probably be alone forever.

Another notable element of this quote is Mrs. Donnelly's reaction to the girl's finding the ring. Her reaction is playful, suggesting a camaraderie and mutual understanding between young women who expect to get married and older married women. Maria is entirely isolated from this interaction, reaffirming her social estrangement as an aging unmarried woman.

☞ They led her up to the table amid laughing and joking and she put her hand out in the air as she was told to do. She moved her hand about here and there in the air and descended on one of the saucers. She felt a soft wet substance with her fingers and was surprised that nobody spoke or took off her bandage. There was a pause for a few seconds; and then a great deal of scuffling and whispering [...] Maria understood that it was wrong that time and so she had to do it over again: and this time she got the prayer-book.

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Donnelly, Joe Donnelly, Next-Door Girls, Maria

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 101

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Maria is participating in the Donnellys' Hallow Eve game, in which she is blindfolded and asked to place her hand on an object that will represent her future. This is the most extreme example of Maria's repression in the whole story: she selects a lump of clay (which symbolizes death), but she refuses to acknowledge—even to herself—which object she has selected, let alone what it represents. In this case, selecting the clay suggests either that death will literally come soon, or that—metaphorically—Maria's life has died. Perhaps since Maria is so paralyzed in her unhappiness, she will be unable to make significant changes in her life, meaning that she will go on like this until she dies. Obviously, this is an uncomfortable and distressing notion to Maria—so distressing, it seems, that she refuses to think about it altogether.

On the one hand, Maria's repression here is understandable; she doesn't want to acknowledge a painful reality. But the magnitude of her repression in this moment is extreme and difficult to believe. Throughout the story, it's clear that Maria is quite familiar with the traditional games of Hallow Eve, so she would presumably know that clay was one of the objects she could select. Due to this, it's striking that she refuses to acknowledge what she has touched. Maria never names the clay; instead she calls it a "soft wet substance," which suggests a refusal to acknowledge even the simple, observable facts of her situation. Of course, on some level, she *must* know—but if she acknowledged the clay, she would have to acknowledge its meaning, and it seems that this would simply be too distressing for her. This moment of repression is even more striking in light of the

fact that she's in front of a group. One might assume that the social aspect of the situation would force her to grapple with reality—especially since everyone is “scuffling and whispering,” which shows clearly that they know what has happened—but Maria maintains her denial nonetheless, selecting another object and pretending that the clay never happened.

Throughout this moment, Maria remains in a state of naïve confusion in which she seems unable to make sense of simple events. This sheds light on her previous feeling of confusion during her uncomfortable interaction with the elderly man on the tram. It seems that Maria's repression works not through blocking out moments altogether, but through making her unable to process their meaning, leaving her confused. In other words, instead of feeling all the negative emotions that she is repressing, she leaves herself in a state of confusion, which is unpleasant but slightly more neutral.

Another notable element of this quote is that Maria finds herself in a very similar situation to the one she is in at the beginning of the story when she serves tea to the women at the laundry. She is again surrounded by “laughing and joking” that makes her uncomfortable. The fact that she still finds herself in the same kind of uncomfortable environment even in her closest friend's home suggests that her sadness and discomfort are irresolvable and that her life has remained stagnant over the course of the story.

☹️ [...] Maria, blushing very much, began to sing in a tiny quavering voice. She sang *I Dreamt that I Dwelt*, and when she came to the second verse she sang again:

I dreamt that I dwelt in marble halls  
With vassals and serfs at my side  
And of all who assembled within those 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,  
That you loved me still the same.

**Related Characters:** Next-Door Girls, Mrs. Donnelly, Joe Donnelly, Maria

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 102

**Explanation and Analysis**

Here, the Donnellys have asked Maria to sing a song for the group before she leaves. This quote illustrates Maria's inability to assert herself when she is asked to do something that makes her uncomfortable. Her “blushing” and “tiny quavering voice” suggest that she does not want to sing, but she shrugs off her own feelings and does what the group wants her to do.

The song Maria sings is the first verse of an aria from *The Bohemian Girl*, an opera by nineteenth-century Irish composer Michael William Balfe. The verse she sings is about dreaming of wealth and luxury. She repeats the first verse twice, rather than moving on to the second one, which is about dreaming of love and suitors. Maria's failure to sing about love reaffirms her denial of her own loneliness: she cannot even bring herself to broach the subject of love and marriage, as it hits too close to home and brings up emotions that are too intense for her (perhaps the same kinds of emotions she experienced when she realized she had lost the plum cake).

In addition, the fact that the verse she sings ends with a dream “That you loved me still the same” suggests that, while Maria can come dangerously close to talking about love, she cannot quite bring herself to do it.

☹️ But no one tried to show her her mistake; and when she had ended her song Joe was very much moved. He said that there was no time like the long ago and no music for him like poor old Balfe, whatever other people might say; and his eyes filled up so much with tears that he could not find what he was looking for and in the end he had to ask his wife to tell him where the corkscrew was.

**Related Characters:** Next-Door Girls, Mrs. Donnelly, Joe Donnelly, Maria

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 102

**Explanation and Analysis**

Here, Maria has just finished singing an aria about dreaming of a better life. She sang the verse about dreaming of wealth and luxury, but she skipped the verse about dreaming of love and suitors, instead singing the first verse twice. This quote demonstrates the hopelessness of Maria's sadness, loneliness, and repression. Presumably, Joe's emotional reaction indicates that he recognizes that Maria skipped the verse about love due to her distress about her loneliness. To sing about dreaming of suitors would be too painful for

Maria, since she finds it impossible even to admit to herself that she wishes to be married, let alone to sing about that wish. Everyone at the party knows that Maria skipped this verse—and they seem to intuit why she skipped it—but nobody says anything to her, likely to help her save face. However, if they're attempting to be kind by not addressing

Maria's loneliness, it's also, in some ways, unfortunate. Not even her closest friends are helping her confront her distress and craft a better life for herself. Thus, the story ends with a final affirmation of Maria's paralysis and hopelessness.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## CLAY

Excited to finish work and go out for the evening, Maria prepares for the women's tea at the charitable laundry where she works. She has scrubbed the kitchen, stoked the fire, and sliced the barmbrack cakes; everything looks wonderful now. A small and calming presence, Maria is known as a "peace-maker" at the laundry. When the women argue, well-liked Maria is the one to resolve the issue.

Maria plans to leave for the evening around seven. She calculates her route, including shopping time, and figures she'll be at her destination by eight. After her tram fare, she'll have a little money left over, and she thinks what a lovely evening she'll have, as long as her friend Joe doesn't come in drunk.

Joe often asks Maria to come live with his family, but Maria—feeling that she would be "in the way"—has declined. Despite how kind Joe's wife is to her, Maria is "accustomed to the life of the laundry" now. When Joe and his brother Alphy were children, Maria cared for them, and Joe has always seen Maria as a mother figure.

Joe and Alphy, in fact, got Maria the job at the laundry. Before working there, Maria had a "bad opinion" of Protestants, but now she thinks of them as "very nice people to live with," even if she finds them a little "quiet and serious." Besides, Maria likes caring for the plants in the conservatory, and even though she's annoyed with the religious messages that hang on the walls, she thinks that the matron who runs the laundry is easy to get along with.

*On the surface, Maria's life seems positive: she does good work at the laundry and is a source of positivity for the women there. However, her excitement to get away from the laundry for the evening suggests that her positive exterior and persona as a "peace-maker" may not tell the whole story.*



*While Maria's planning suggests excitement about going out, her concerns about Joe's drunkenness imply an underlying anxiety about the evening ahead. These concerns lay the groundwork for Maria's consistent discomfort with alcohol throughout the story, a discomfort that she tries to repress. It is also clear that Maria just barely has enough money to get through the evening, suggesting the difficulty of supporting herself as a single woman.*



*Joe and his wife clearly have a lot of affection for Maria, and there's no reason to doubt that she would be more than welcome in Joe's home, so her repeated refusal to live there seems to be rooted in insecurity and stagnation. Joyce makes this especially clear when he notes that she was "accustomed to [...] the laundry," suggesting that big life changes would be too much for Maria, even if they might change her life for the better.*



*Maria may be repressing her true feelings about life at the laundry. While she claims to be comfortable as a Catholic woman working in a Protestant establishment, her claims are unconvincing. Her bland description of Protestants as "very nice" and her enjoyment of the conservatory, a trivial part of her daily life, are not very compelling reasons for her to be happy at the laundry. In contrast, her dislike of the religious messages on the walls is a convincing and specific indicator of her discomfort with aspects of her life. Nevertheless, she represses her discomfort and refuses to consider leaving the laundry, instead thinking of how nice her life is.*



Since tea is ready, Maria rings a bell and the women begin to file in, all of them sweaty from work. Over mugs of tea and slices of barmbrack, the women joke and laugh together. One of them suggests that Maria will find a **ring** in her barmbrack, which she suggests every Hallow Eve. To this, Maria “ha[s] to laugh” and insist that she doesn’t want to get married, although her eyes show “disappointed shyness.” When they toast to Maria’s health, another woman says she wishes she had porter rather than tea, and Maria laughs uncomfortably, thinking that this woman means well, even if she has the “notions of a common woman.”

When tea ends, Maria is excited. She goes to her room to change and, remembering that she has mass in the morning, sets her alarm for an hour earlier than usual. Putting on her best clothes, she looks in the mirror, remembering what she used to wear to mass when she was a girl. Maria is still fond of her body, “in spite of its years.”

It’s raining outside and the tram is full, so Maria sits uncomfortably on a stool at the end of the car. She reflects that it’s “better” that she is independent and has her own money, and she thinks the evening will be nice, even though Joe and Alphy—who were close as boys—are no longer speaking. She exits the tram and buys some cakes at a shop. Then, wanting “something really nice,” she heads to another cake shop, where she browses for a long time. This annoys the young woman who works there, and the woman asks Maria if she’s trying to buy a wedding cake. Maria “blush[es] and smile[s]” before choosing a slice of plum cake.

*Maria repeatedly fails to defend herself when she is being mocked and instead shrugs off her own discomfort. After the first woman’s comment, Maria’s eyes reveal her sadness that she does not have a husband (despite the fact that she denies wanting one), but she laughs off these feelings. The fact that this woman makes this joke every year on Hallow Eve implies that Maria has never stood up for herself, demonstrating her lack of personal growth over the years. Maria reacts similarly to the second woman’s comment about wanting alcohol, laughing off her discomfort and trying to convince herself that the comment was said with good intentions, despite the fact that she knows deep down that it was not. This is the second instance of Maria implying her discomfort with alcohol. She clearly hates when people drink, but she refuses to say so.*



*Maria’s setting her alarm clock back is another reminder of her isolation as a Catholic woman at the laundry. Given that it is Hallow Eve, the next morning will be All Saints’ Day, a holiday on which Maria presumably wants to go to mass. Evidently, since the laundry is run by Protestants, she must make time for mass outside of work hours, rather than being permitted to take time off work to go to mass. She does not acknowledge her isolation as a Catholic woman, though—another instance of repression. Maria’s nostalgia for her younger body and former clothes indicates a desire to return to a time when she felt more attractive and perhaps had the potential to marry. While she claims to be comfortable with her body now, she still finds “its years” somewhat troublesome and perhaps wishes that she could still be attractive to men and eligible for marriage.*



*Maria’s travels are full of discomfort—she has to walk in the rain, and she barely finds a seat on the crowded tram—but she refuses to acknowledge these unfortunate conditions. She instead represses any negativity by telling herself that she prefers traveling independently, rather than acknowledging that she is lonely and wants a husband. She is also clearly bothered by the tension between Joe and Alphy, but she pushes those thoughts aside and focuses on how positive the evening will be. Maria’s “blush[ing] and smile[ing]” in response to the woman in the shop indicates both her discomfort with the woman’s remark and her underlying wish that she could be shopping for a wedding cake and getting married, but she leaves the shop without thinking or speaking about her true feelings.*



As she gets back on the tram, Maria thinks she will have to stand because “none of the young men seem to notice her,” but an elderly man finally makes room for her to sit. The man is “colonel-looking” and Maria finds him more polite than the younger men. The man notices the cakes Maria is carrying, and the two make pleasant conversation about how children should enjoy their youth. When the tram reaches Maria’s destination, the two say goodbye to one another, and Maria goes out into the rain. She thinks of the man as “easy [...] to know,” despite the fact that he was a little drunk (“he ha[d] a drop taken”).

*Maria’s travels continue to be uncomfortable as she, once again, cannot find a seat on the tram, but she does not think about her discomfort. The fact that the “young men” do not pay any attention to her suggests that she is no longer attractive to men or eligible for marriage, though she does not think about this at all. Notably, the only man who makes room for her is “colonel-looking.” This description implies that he is British and Protestant and, therefore, someone who might make Maria uncomfortable, given her discomfort with the Protestant religious messages she sees at the laundry. He is also slightly drunk, which always makes Maria uneasy. Oddly, though, she does not express any discomfort with him, suggesting a deep repression of her true feelings.*



Maria arrives at Joe’s house and receives an enthusiastic greeting from him, his wife, his children, and two girls from next door. She gives the bag of cakes to the children. Mrs. Donnelly finds it “too good” of Maria to bring the cakes.

*The warm greeting Maria receives, coupled with Mrs. Donnelly’s clear gratitude for the cakes, suggests that Maria is welcome in the Donnellys’ home, reaffirming that her refusal to live there is due only to her own insecurities.*



Maria then looks for the plum cake but cannot find it anywhere. She asks the children if they ate it; they deny having done so and are uncomfortable with the accusation. Mrs. Donnelly concludes that Maria left the cake behind on the tram. Maria recalls the “confus[ion]” she felt during her conversation on the tram with the elderly man and feels “shame and vexation and disappointment.” She is on the verge of tears as she reflects on her losing the cake and the money she wasted.

*Maria’s inability to find the plum cake is the first indication in the story that her loneliness might never be resolved, even if she tries to make it better: she has attempted to make a real connection with the Donnellys by bringing them a special slice of cake, but she only ends up making the children uncomfortable and making herself look foolish, thereby reaffirming her own alienation and sadness. Importantly, while she attributes her loss of the cake to the “confus[ion]” she felt when talking to the man on the tram, she never implied that she was “confused” in the moment, instead claiming that her experience with him was pleasant. Evidently, she repressed her emotions deeply when she was on the tram, and those emotions are now coming to the surface.*



Joe reassures Maria that the plum cake is not important and “ma[kes] her” sit by the fire. He tells her about a witty retort he made to his boss and laughs. Maria does not understand why he is laughing but she tries to say the right thing.

*The fact that Joe “ma[kes]” Maria sit by the fire indicates that she does not want to. This moment is the first of many over the course of the evening in which Maria is forced to do something she does not want to do, which makes her very uncomfortable. When Maria does not understand the humor in Joe’s remark, she does not ask him to explain it. Instead, she represses her confusion, just as she did with the man on the tram.*



As the festivities continue, Joe “insist[s]” that Maria have a drink, even though she does not want to. Maria then tries to talk to Joe about Alphy, but Joe swears that he will never speak to his brother again. Maria apologizes for bringing up the subject. Mrs. Donnelly objects to the way Joe speaks about his brother, but Joe refuses even to consider Alphy his brother anymore. He does not want to get too angry on Hallow Eve, though, and he asks Mrs. Donnelly to get him another drink.

*Joe exacerbates Maria’s discomfort with alcohol both by forcing her to drink and by wanting another drink himself, which makes Maria’s earlier fear of Joe’s drunkenness a reality. Joe also has no respect for Maria’s opinions about Alphy, despite the fact that Maria is making a true effort to change things for the better. Evidently, Joe’s home is not the safe haven Maria expected it to be; even with her closet friend, she feels uncomfortable, alienated, and unable to assert herself.*



The group’s mood improves as the next-door girls organize Hallow Eve games for everyone to play. Maria is glad that the group is in a good mood. The next-door girls **blindfold** each child and lead them up to a table with saucers on it. One of the next-door girls, during her turn in the game, selects a **ring**. The girls then “insist[.]” that Maria participate. Maria laughs as they blindfold her. Once blindfolded, Maria places her hand on a “**soft wet substance.**” She is “surprised” that everyone is silent and that they have not taken off her blindfold. The group begins whispering uneasily. Maria figures that she should try again, this time placing her hand on a prayer book.

*The group’s good mood allows Maria to repress all the negativity that Joe has been causing her to feel. The game depicted here involves blindfolded players placing their hands-on objects that symbolize their futures. The fact that the next-door girls organize the game and are excited about it suggests that, as young women who are eligible for marriage, they are optimistic about their futures. One of the girls, indeed, finds a ring, symbolizing upcoming marriage, which would grant her the social acceptance and belonging that Maria cannot have. Maria is not at all optimistic about her future, playing the game only after she is forced to. The “soft wet substance” that she selects is a lump of clay, symbolizing death in the game and perhaps total stagnation and perpetual loneliness for Maria. While Maria must be aware of the significance of her selection, she refuses to think about it, instead standing still and waiting for everyone else to speak. Her “surprise[.]” that no one says anything suggests deep repression: if she allowed herself to acknowledge the clay and its meaning, she would know why everyone was silent and uncomfortable. The group’s silence also indicates that even they are in denial about Maria’s loneliness. The failure even of Maria’s closest friends to speak about her difficulties suggests that Maria’s life will never improve. Her second selection, a prayer book, symbolizes entrance into a convent, which reaffirms the idea that Maria will never marry.*



Once the game has ended, Joe again insists that Maria have a drink. Mrs. Donnelly says that Maria will enter a convent soon because she placed her hand on a prayer book in the game. Maria thinks that Joe has been nicer to her this evening than he has ever been, and she says that the whole group has been “very good to her.”

*Joe, once again, makes Maria uncomfortable by forcing her to drink. Mrs. Donnelly mentions only the prayer book and not the clay, suggesting that she is in denial about the clay and its significance. When Maria thinks positively about how everyone has treated her, she is clearly repressing her true feelings: the fact that she cannot acknowledge the discomfort and coercion she has experienced over the course of the evening suggests, once again, a deep emotional repression.*



The children are tired, and Joe and Mrs. Donnelly push Maria to sing an old song. With a “tiny quavering voice” and “blushing very much,” Maria sings a song called “I Dreamt that I Dwelt.” She sings the first verse—about dreaming of wealth and luxury—twice, which no one points out to her. Joe finds her performance moving and he expresses nostalgia for the past and for old music. He gets so teary-eyed that he has to ask Mrs. Donnelly for help finding the corkscrew.

*Even in the final moments of the story, the Donnellys are forcing Maria to do something she does not want to do. Her voice and face clearly show her discomfort with performing for the group, but she performs anyway because they want her to. The song she sings is an aria from *The Bohemian Girl*, an opera by nineteenth-century Irish composer Michael William Balfe. Notably, the verse that Maria skips is about dreaming of love and suitors. Her omission of that verse signifies that she has resigned herself to never marrying. It may also indicate that her loneliness makes the subjects of marriage and love too painful to sing about. Joe is clearly moved by Maria’s performance. He claims that his emotional reaction is due to nostalgia, but he may also be perceiving how lonely Maria is as an aging single woman. By not pointing out her omission of the second verse, though, Joe and the rest of the group fail to acknowledge Maria’s sadness or try to improve her life, leaving Maria stuck in her loneliness.*





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Goluboff, Isaac. "Clay." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 21 Feb 2020. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

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Goluboff, Isaac. "Clay." LitCharts LLC, February 21, 2020. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/clay>.

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Joyce, James. *Clay*. Penguin. 1993.

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Joyce, James. *Clay*. London: Penguin. 1993.