

Two Gallants



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JAMES JOYCE

James Joyce was born as one of ten children to John Stanislaus Joyce and Mary Jane Joyce. James's father was a "rate collector" (similar to a tax collector), but was subsequently dismissed from his job as a result of his heavy drinking and high debts. This dismissal meant that James had to leave his school at the time, as his family could not afford to pay the tuition. Rotating through schools for most of his childhood, Joyce eventually ended up going to college at University College, Dublin, where he studied English, French and Italian. He went on to briefly study medicine in France, but dropped out. His writing career was characterized by fits and starts, as he wrote most of his novels outside Ireland, while teaching English abroad or making money through freelance work (writing reviews, editorials, or--interestingly--singing). In 1904 he met his wife, Nora Barnacle, and they had two children: Lucia and George (often called Giorgio). Joyce published his first book, *Dubliners*, in 1914, followed by the novels *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* (1916), *Ulysses* (1922). Each of these works became progressively more Modernist, and Joyce himself came to be seen as one of the towering Modernist artists, though the stories of *Dubliners* might also be described as falling into the Realist school. Each book also garnered rave reviews and public controversy for what many saw as their indecency in their focus on issues sexual, scatological, and political. Though Joyce was raised Catholic, he lapsed in adulthood, and later rejected religion entirely. Joyce died just shy of his 59th birthday, of a perforated ulcer. He is buried in Zürich, Switzerland, although there has been discussion concerning returning his body to Ireland.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Joyce's work is largely informed by Ireland's fraught relation with Britain. Ireland lacked "home rule"--it was ruled, as a colony might be, by England. As such, Ireland was limited in its liberties and cultural opportunities, and endured a prolonged and profound economic decline. Further, the fraught relation between the Protestants and the Catholics in Ireland had--and has--divided the country for centuries. This tension was not only religious but also political, with the Irish Protestants being generally more pro-England and the Catholic Irish seeking independence. These tensions came to a boil soon after *Dubliners* was published in 1914, when, in 1916, the "Easter Rising" erupted in Dublin--a six day rebellion of the Irish against English rule. Though the English quelled the rebellion, it marked the unofficial start of the Irish War of Independence, a

bloody, often guerilla-style war that resulted in Irish independence in 1921. But these tensions also existed in the decades before the publication of *Dubliners*. Of particular importance was Charles Parnell, an Irish statesman who nearly led Ireland to home rule in the years before the 19th century, only to be abandoned and betrayed by many, including the Catholic Church, when it was revealed that he had been having an affair with a married woman. The anger, mistrust, and sense of betrayal that permeated Irish society as a result of Parnell's fall are especially evident in "Two Gallants."

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Besides the short story collection *Dubliners*, Joyce is best known for his monumental novel *Ulysses*, which includes several of the characters from *Dubliners*. *Ulysses* loosely follows the plot of *The Odyssey*, but reduces the heroic exploits of that epic story to the day-to-day happenings of modern Dublin. Joyce also wrote *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Finnegan's Wake*, and a play called "Exiles." With all these works, Joyce flirted with the limits of language and literature. Disregarding previous modes of writing, Joyce was what critics describe as a "modernist": a mode of writing that disrupted and questioned previous systems of literature, breaking down literary conventions. In *Finnegan's Wake*, for instance, Joyce often created entirely new words and ways of using language. He influenced another famous Irish writer, Samuel Beckett, who was not only Joyce's friend, but transcribed works for Joyce when Joyce was going blind. Beckett continued Joyce's literary legacy with his own avant-garde literary techniques, seen in his trilogy composed of three works: *Malloy*, *Malone Dies*, and the *Unnamable*, as well as many plays--most famously "Waiting for Godot."

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Two Gallants
- **When Written:** circa 1904–1907
- **Where Written:** Zürich, Switzerland and Trieste, Italy (then Austria-Hungary)
- **When Published:** June 1914
- **Literary Period:** Realism and Modernism
- **Genre:** Short Story, Modernist Fiction, Vignettes
- **Setting:** Dublin, Ireland
- **Climax:** At the very end of the story, Corley finally "pulls it off" and reveals the gold coin he obtained from the maid he has been seeing.
- **Antagonist:** There is no particular antagonist, but more generally the decline of Ireland.

- **Point of View:** Third person limited omniscient narration (glimpses of characters' feelings are limited to Lenehan's mental state)

EXTRA CREDIT

Dubliners? Though Joyce was born and raised in Dublin, he did not actually write "Two Gallants" in Dublin. Joyce travelled widely overseas through his job teaching English, and was living in Italy and Switzerland during the time he was writing "Two Gallants." His life outside Ireland was often viewed as a rejection of Ireland as a nation.

Joyce's Rejection. Joyce submitted *Dubliners* to 15 different publishers. Two accepted his manuscript. One subsequently refused to publish it due to what was seen as inappropriate content and obscenity, particularly in relation to the story "Two Gallants." The short story collection was finally accepted by the publisher Grant Richards.



PLOT SUMMARY

On a Sunday in August, two young men named Corley and Lenehan **walk** through Dublin. Corley is telling Lenehan a story, and Lenehan laughs, ostentatiously appreciating Corley's tale. Lenehan, the narrator of the story explains, is good at ingratiating himself with people who might otherwise think him a social leech. Lenehan asks Corley where he met the **woman** he's about to see, and Corley proceeds to talk about his lover, who is a maid. Corley's speech verges on crude as he brags about how the woman has bought him goods, like cigars, and how he was worried she would become pregnant, but he knows that she's too savvy for that to happen.

Still walking through the city, Lenehan asks Corley if he can "pull it off," and if the woman Corley will be meeting will be willing. Corley, the son of a police officer but himself uninterested in work beyond making money as a police informant, assures Lenehan that he will, again using crude terms. The two proceed to talk about the women Corley has dated in the past. Corley says he used to be a proper romantic who was courteous and bought women things. The two men agree, though, that these sorts of romantic gestures are a fool's game that never get you anything. One woman Corley had been with is now a prostitute, he reveals. After asking if Corley was the one to push her in that direction, Lenehan again asks Corley if he can "pull it off." Corley, this time annoyed, says vehemently that he can.

Suddenly, the two men come upon a man playing a **harp** in the road. The harpist looks tired, and the narrator of the story describes the harp as being like a weary woman, with its clothes around its knees. Corley and Lenehan don't stop to watch for long, though, and continue on their way with the sad music

following them. Finally, at a park at the center of the city, Corley sees the maid he previously described to Lenehan. Lenehan, excited, suggests that the two men ogle her from a distance. Corley, though, thinks Lenehan is trying to take his woman, and there is a brief moment of tension before Lenehan assures Corley that he doesn't.

Agreeing to meet up with Corley later, Lenehan goes off on his own through Dublin's streets. With Corley gone, Lenehan's demeanor changes, and he takes on a tired and thoughtful persona. He stops in a "Refreshment Bar" where he orders food using a rough voice so as to seem less genteel than he is. Eating a meagre meal of peas and ginger beer, he imagines Corley's exploits with his lover. He also muses over his dissatisfaction about his own life, wondering why, at almost 31, he is still financially and personally insecure. He wishes to settle down, without having any idea how that might be possible. Finishing his meal, he begins walking once more, encountering some friends who he talks to briefly before continuing on his way.

Still wondering about Corley, Lenehan then has the sneaking suspicion that Corley has betrayed him, and that Corley will not show up at their prearranged meeting point. But at just that moment Corley appears with his lover. Lenehan watches as Corley and his lover walk near a house; Corley waits while the woman goes inside. She hurries out of the house and gives Corley something that Lenehan can't see. Lenehan hails Corley to see what has happened, and wordlessly Corley opens his palm to display a small **gold coin** lying there.



CHARACTERS

Lenehan – A 30-year-old man living in Dublin, Lenehan has the air of a man who has seen better times. Though relatively young and the son of what was (at least at one time) a well-to-do family, his hair is thin and graying, his belly is thickening, and his face is "ravaged." Lenehan is vaguely associated with earning a living through gambling on horse racing. His friend, Corley, dominates Lenehan's personality at the story's beginning. Lenehan laughs at Corley's jokes, permits Corley to push him off the sidewalk with his thoughtless way of **walking**, and generally reacts appreciatively to Corley's crude and unappealing persona. The narrator of the story explicitly explains that Lenehan is good at ingratiating himself with those around him; he's deft at edging his way into a group and getting included in the next round of beers, for instance, without getting branded a mooch. After Corley goes off with his lover, though, Lenehan becomes an entirely different person. He has an air of "gentility" that recalls the melancholic nobility of the **harpist** the two men encountered on their walk. He laments his financial and personal instability, recognizes the shallowness of his social life, and wishes he were settled and fulfilled, instead of verging on 31 and still wandering Dublin's streets on the verge of financial disaster and without a wife or family.

Lenehan's introspective moments indicate that though he plays Corley's manipulative game, he wishes it were otherwise. He wishes that his life were more meaningful, rather than aimless and hollow. That he cannot see any way to achieve those goals more broadly implies the general failure of Ireland—Ireland's culture, society, and economy seem to make Lenehan's dreams hopelessly beyond his reach.

Corley – Corley is the son of a police inspector but is himself unemployed and uninterested in finding steady work. What money he does make seems to come primarily from occasionally acting as a police informant, which in itself implies a decline from his father's generation to his own. Corley regards none of this with shame. Rather, he is a man who believes in his own powers of seduction—both in storytelling and womanizing. Corley is less attractive than he believes, though: his “large, globular and oily” head sweats profusely, and he talks only about himself, not listening to others. Though he enjoys passing judgments, he does not seem to be able to turn that judgment inward to recognize his own faults. He accepts Lenehan's over-the-top way of sucking up at face value and does not have the “subtle mind” to recognize when Lenehan is being sarcastic. Corley was once something of a romantic, but his experiences have led him to the belief that such behavior is, in fact, a game for idiots, as it never gets you anything. He is uninterested in treating **women** with respect or gallantry, and instead now focuses on wooing and manipulating the women he sees in order to get them to spend their money on him. Other than a single brief moment in the story, Corley shows no remorse for his behavior, and he comes to seem like a man who has fully molded his own way of being to function in Ireland's declining society.

The Maid – The maid plays a small but significant role in the story. Corley first met her one evening when he said goodnight to her. This led to the two of them taking a **walk** around the canal, during which she told Corley that she works as a domestic maid—or a “slavey”—in a house on Baggot Street. It is implied that Corley and the maid have sex after this initial meeting and then start seeing each other regularly. The maid is savvy enough to not get pregnant, though Corley is afraid she might. The maid seems to have genuine feelings for Corley, though, as she buys him good quality cigarettes and cigars and pays for Corley's tram tickets. She doesn't know Corley's name but apparently thinks that he is “a bit of class,” according to Corley. At any rate, the maid seems to like Corley, though his behavior makes clear that he does not genuinely care for her. Corley's treatment of the maid can be seen as standing in for his and other Irish men's mistreatment of all Irish **women**. On the night when the story takes place, the maid wears blue and white clothes, which are the colors of the Virgin Mary. But unlike Mary, the maid isn't a virgin, and she isn't pure or innocent. Corley also doesn't revere or respect her in any way, which parallels the way Great Britain was dominating and

exploiting Ireland under colonial rule in the early 20th century (when the story is set). At the end of the story, the maid steals a **coin** from her employer's house and gives it to Corley. Through this gesture, the depths of Corley's manipulation and mistreatment of the maid become clear: he has used her for money and exploited her feelings for him to get her to commit petty crime.



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.



IRELAND'S DECLINE

Joyce once wrote that he set the stories of *Dubliners* in Dublin because he saw that city as being the center of a “paralysis” that he saw as afflicting all of Ireland. “Two Gallants” puts the paralysis and decline of Ireland on full display. One way the story makes this point is through an intensive use of symbolism—from the **harp**, to the street names, to the **moon** and colors that symbolize purity and the Catholic Church, to the fact that Lenehan's path is basically just one big circle, so that for all his **walking**, he ends up where he started. Together, these symbols indicate both Ireland's decline and the various forces behind that decline. The story also captures Ireland's fall through the characters it portrays. First and foremost are Lenehan and Corley, who come from well-to-do backgrounds but who are—as petty conmen who avoid honest work and seek to manipulate **women**—morally, spiritually, and financially bankrupt. But Lenehan and Corley are not outliers. The story portrays all of Irish society as similarly fallen, as both the product of its failed citizens but also the cause of the citizens' failure.

“Two Gallants” is suffused with symbolism, and all of it is used to both communicate the declined state of Ireland and the causes underlying that decline. Virtually every symbol in the story—and there are a lot of symbols in the story—is connected to Ireland's decline. For instance, the harp, which is a traditional symbol of Ireland, is personified as a weary woman dishonored by her master and the people watching her being played. The moon, which functions as a symbol of purity or saintliness, continually gets obscured by clouds, implying the general loss of such purity in Ireland. Women function as a symbol for Ireland in the story as well, and those women are constantly being mistreated, objectified, betrayed, and even prostituted by Irish men. While not precisely symbols, even the streets that Lenehan and Curley walk on suggest and record Ireland's historical decline under English colonial rule. From Rutland

Square, which was named for a British lord, to George's Street, on which a man flew a black flag with an uncrowned harp to protest British rule in 1849, the story's locations are imbued with a history of English domination. Within this landscape of Ireland's decline, it's no surprise that Lenehan's journey ends at the corner of Ely Place—a dead end.

The characters themselves and their behavior also attest to Ireland's decline. The story implies that Corley and Lenehan were both born into upper-middle-class families, but that both have now fallen on hard times due to an interplay of national and personal failures. Such a decline is evident in the shift from Corley's father, a police inspector, to Corley himself, who avoids honest work and scrapes together an income as a police informant. Lenehan's way of speaking makes clear his "genteel" upbringing, and when he orders a meager meal of buttered peas and ginger beer, he is embarrassed enough by his fall that he tries to hide the way he speaks to better fit in. Meanwhile, Lenehan wishes for a settled life that itself seems a pale reflection of what his own youth must have been like, but he can't even see a way to attain that bit of comfort or security.

Irish society, as portrayed in "Two Gallants," is beset by a vicious circle: lacking self-rule or autonomy, its culture, economy, and institutions have declined. That decline has resulted in its citizens becoming thwarted hopeless, focused on what they can scrape for themselves from the scarcity of opportunities—and the citizens, thus reduced, fail their country in turn, offering Ireland no hope for renewal.



RESTLESSNESS, LACK OF BELONGING, AND DISCONTENTEDNESS

Not much happens in "Two Gallants." Most of the story centers on Lenehan and Corley **walking** around Dublin, laughing and talking. And even the minor things that do happen—Corley meets his romantic interest, perhaps has sex with her, and then gets her to commit a petty crime—are left unseen. The story instead follows Lenehan as he wanders around morosely, idly talks with some friends, and eats some peas. Both because so little happens and because the story deliberately avoids showing what does happen, "Two Gallants" has a sense, throughout, of aimlessness and pointless action. The plot is as meandering as the two men's walking route through the city; as seemingly pointless as the fact that the men's path ends up being just a big circle. That very aimlessness and pointlessness, as well as all that walking, though, *is* the point of the story, as it expresses the two men's—and Ireland's—lack of belonging and stability.

By following Lenehan on his walk through London, rather than Corley's rendezvous with the maid, "Two Gallants" focuses on the impact of inaction, paralysis, and lack of connection. After Corley departs with the maid, Lenehan thinks about "the problem of how he could pass the hours till he met Corley

again." He comes up with nothing other than to just keep walking. Lenehan has nowhere to go, nothing to do. Instead of walking toward a destination, Lenehan walks to kill time. Thus, walking is a symbol of restlessness and lack of belonging in the story, rather than a signal of purpose. While lacking purpose, though, Lenehan's walking is still tiring. In the rare moments of stillness in the story, he thinks that "he was glad that he could rest from all his walking." The implication is that it is not just the physical exertion of walking, but also the activity's purposelessness, that tires Lenehan out. When Lenehan longs to settle down with a job, a wife, and financial security, he is also metaphorically longing to rest from his walk, to have someplace to go and to care about. Even when Lenehan does have reason to stop walking, the outcome is less than fulfilling. For instance, when Lenehan stops for a bit to talk with some friends, they seem distant, distracted: "They looked vacantly after some figures in the crowd and sometimes made a critical remark." Even while resting, there is an element of walking's transience that lurks in Lenehan's interactions: instead of feeling connected, Lenehan and his friends are disconnected, as if they are still, metaphorically, on the move.

The characters' disconnection from each other and from their society is further communicated by the way that they are constantly playing roles rather than being themselves. Joyce's story begins with Corley bringing a long "monologue" to a close. This choice of words at once makes clear that Corley and Lenehan are not truly interacting. Corley is, rather, performing a speech that he thinks makes him look impressive. Lenehan, meanwhile, reacts to the story with theatrics of his own, and is constantly glancing at Corley's face to make sure he is making the right impression. While the story makes clear that Lenehan is adept at such action—he is "armed with a vast stock of stories, limericks and riddles" such that he can worm his way into various social groups—he later acknowledges to himself that his "tongue was tired" from talking all day. Though he performs in order to "belong," the task itself is exhausting. Later, he thinks wearily that "he knew he would have to speak a great deal, to invent and amuse, and his brain and throat were too dry for such a task." Lenehan's exhaustion makes clear the cost of living in a society in which social interaction is a matter of performance rather than genuine connection, in which no one belongs because no one is themselves.

Always acting out a role, always working to fit in social groups by figuring out the right thing to say or way to say it, Lenehan makes his way through the city but does not truly belong there. While the story implies that, in Ireland, such discontent and lack of belonging is endemic—that everyone is forced to put on a show to get by—"Two Gallants" also asserts the importance of seemingly mundane interactions. Walking, running into distracted friends, feeling like one has to play a role to belong—these are everyday sensations that are often not included in traditional stories. So even as "Two Gallants"

embodies a feeling of discontent and pointlessness, the story also asserts that everyday boredom and lack of purpose is worth telling a story about, thus elevating the everyday gnawing of discontent to the level of the story-worthy.



WOMEN AND A LACK OF GALLANTRY

As Lenehan and Corley **walk** through Dublin, the two men's main topic of conversation revolves around **women**. Yet the way in which Lenehan and

Corley speak about and treat women is far from respectful. Thus, the title of the story, "Two Gallants," is ironic—Lenehan and Corley are anything but gallant. Their main goal, as becomes clear at the story's end, is to manipulate the maid whom Corley has met into stealing money for them. They see women not only as sex objects, but as sex objects to be even further scammed for money. Yet even as the men mistreat the women around them, they also wish they could meet a "good" woman to settle down with, without ever realizing that they themselves are driving the culture that makes it nearly impossible for a woman to meet this ideal of being "good."

While the story doesn't explicitly explore the situation of women in Ireland, it portrays a society in which women are put in an impossible situation. Through Corley and Lenehan's behavior toward women, "Two Gallants" implies that such men believe that women should be chaste and pure—yet they also hate women who won't quickly sleep with them and ruthlessly work seduce the women they encounter. Corley and Lenehan agree that paying money to go on dates with women who won't give you anything in return is a fool's errand. Yet they talk disparagingly of the maid who does like Corley and is willing to have sex with him—they see her as someone to manipulate and use, not as someone worthy of actual care or love.

The women in "Two Gallants" have no way to navigate the men's contradictory desires. The maid is dressed in blue in white, colors that are associated with the Virgin Mary in Catholicism. This subtly contrasts the maid, who offers Corley sexual favors, with the Virgin Mary. In Dublin, purity is out of reach—and "Two Gallants" makes clear that for women, a lack of "purity" is equated with a loss of worth. Though the maid apparently likes Corley, Corley views her as nothing more than an object of gratification. In contrast to Corley's brags about sexual exploits, at one point the men mention a woman whom Corley once dated but who has since become a prostitute. This woman has sex for money—which isn't that different from Corley himself, who brags about his skill at getting women to buy him presents, like free tram rides or cigars. Lenehan, however, is first excited that perhaps Corley was the one who drove the woman into prostitution, and then calls the woman a "betrayal" when he learns that other men were "at her" before him. Corley, Lenehan, and other Irish men treat women as objects to be "got at," but then blame those women for actually giving in, with the implication that such women are then socially

ruined.

Even as they mistreat women, though, Lenehan (and even Corley, to some extent) seems to long for a stable relationship with a "good" woman. While Lenehan seems to vicariously delight in Corley's romantic "conquests," as soon as he is apart from Corley, his behavior changes. While eating alone, Lenehan wistfully hopes to "settle down in some snug corner" with "some good simple-minded girl." Even as Lenehan urges on Corley's exploitation of women, he longs for a world where he can "settle down" with a "good" woman. Unlike Corley, Lenehan seems to recognize what he is missing in the absence of a loving relationship with a woman. It is not clear, however, whether Lenehan realizes that by egging Corley on, he participates in the male mistreatment of women that makes the qualifier "good" something no Irish woman can fulfill.

The story then further uses the symbol of the **harp** to connect the men's lack of gallantry toward women more broadly to Ireland's general decline. The harp is personified in the story as a woman, and it's described as having "her coverings" "fallen about her knees," and as being "weary alike of the eyes of strangers and of her master's hands." Like the many disrespected women of the story, "Two Gallants" portrays Ireland itself as a woman betrayed at the hands of ungallant men who won't uphold her honor or dignity. So while women are often portrayed as "fallen"—like the prostitute that Corley once liked—men are, in actuality, the ones who are letting women down in "Two Gallants." And in so doing, the story suggests, they are dishonoring their country in the same way that they dishonor the women they discuss and pursue. Ireland, like the harp, is akin to a disgraced woman, too often humiliated and abused by her "master"—in this case, both men as a whole and England as a colonial power. The parallel between colonial abuse and male dominance is made clear by the use of "conqueror" to describe Corley. But as this term could just as easily describe England and English rule in Ireland, the way men treat women in the story is paralleled by the way the English treat the Irish.

In its title, the story describes its two main characters as "gallants," but it is quickly clear that the title is bitterly ironic. The men are far from gallant; they fulfill none of the bravery, elegance, or self-sacrifice that would be characteristic of a traditionally gallant man. Instead they are poor, lewd, lazy, and exploitative. The other characters in the story are similarly fallen, while the women have been used and manipulated by the men and have been driven to prostitution and crime. Through its symbolism and the plight of its characters, "Two Gallants" suggests that Ireland has so declined that gallantry within it has not just gone missing—it is impossible.



MONEY, TRANSACTION, AND RELATIONSHIPS

“Two Gallants” is full of characters talking and thinking about money. Lenehan and Corley, for instance, talk about the foolishness of spending money on **women**. The narrator of the story also mentions what the two men do to scrape by, their methods for getting other people to pay for things they want, and even how other characters make money. Further, the primary action of the story centers around what Corley is trying to “pull off” with the unnamed maid he is meeting, which it is revealed at the end of “Two Gallants” is to get her to either give him money or steal some for him. Meanwhile, the story makes clear that Lenehan and Corley are both poor though they came from formerly well-to-do families, and that their friends seem to be similarly hard off. This general impoverishment provides more context for the story’s and characters’ constant focus on money—if a person doesn’t have money, they will always be thinking about it. And this constant need for money explains why the characters treat seemingly every social interaction in the story not as an opportunity for connection, but rather as merely transactional, as opportunities to get more than they give. In this way, “Two Gallants” suggests that the financial poverty in Ireland has also resulted in a poverty of social life, in which stability, friendship, and love are both financially and emotionally impossible to achieve.

Both Lenehan and Corley are poor and always talking about, thinking about, and defined by money. Lenehan makes the little money he has through some connection to gambling on horse racing, and his social interactions are largely defined by being ingratiating enough to worm his way into social groups such that he is included in the next ordered round of drinks. The narrator notes that it is only Lenehan’s quick social wit that stops others from thinking of him as a “leech.” But the fact is that he *does* leech off of other people, and his life is defined by attempts to get money or to get things for free. Similarly, Corley brags about how dumb he used to be when he would spend money on women. Now he prides himself on his ability to get women to buy things for him: cigarettes, cigars, tram tickets. Procuring such gifts—rather than human connection, or love, or even lust—is the main goal of his romantic encounters. The story makes a joke out of this behavior by implying that Corley pronounces his last name in a manner that more closely resembles “Whorely”—and hammers home that Corley’s interactions are entirely transactional.

The lack of money makes a stable life and relationship impossible. While eating a meager meal of peas that he had to think hard about before buying, Lenehan thinks about how he is tired of his “poverty of purse and spirit.” In this line, the story links lack of money to lack of joy. It does not matter if poverty of purse causes poverty of spirit, or vice versa—the point is that Lenehan’s lack of money has made his life unfulfilling and difficult. Moreover, Lenehan longs for a good job—where he

could make money— which would allow him to buy a home of his own. Without money, Lenehan can only wander the streets. It’s not just that he has nowhere to go; he can’t even afford to go anywhere, much less to build a stable life or support a family. His poverty makes his dreams impossible to achieve.

The story highlights the destructiveness of purely transactional relationships by keeping hidden whatever it is that Corley is trying to “pull off” with the maid whom he is seeing. The story revolves around Lenehan’s often repeated question: can Corley pull “it” off—without explaining for most of the narrative what “it” is. At first, readers might be inclined to believe that Corley is trying to get the woman to marry him. But Corley’s disreputable nature quickly makes that seem unlikely, and instead suggests that Corley is trying to convince the woman to have sex with him. But as the story progresses, it becomes clear that Corley has likely already had sex with the maid—he comments on his unfounded worry that she might get pregnant, while Lenehan’s urgent interest in whether Corley can pull “it” off implies a personal interest beyond a vicarious desire to hear about Corley’s sex life. At the story’s end, the mystery is revealed: Corley’s goal was nothing sexual at all—it was to convince the maid to steal from her employer for him. Through the shifting expectations set up by the story, “Two Gallants” implies that Corley’s transactional goal—to use his relationship with the maid to make money—is even worse than a basic lust for sex.

In “Two Gallants,” romance, sex, human relations, happiness, and pleasure are all exchanged for one, small **gold coin**. The procurement of the coin seems like a triumph to Corley and Lenehan, but that same small coin after so much mysterious buildup may strike the reader as an anticlimax. Through this juxtaposition, Joyce shows the futility of Lenehan and Corley’s actions. All their planning, joking, and worrying about whether or not it would “come off” has culminated in this rather pathetic financial gain. The maid’s petty theft is the only thing they have to show for all their plans—and it is a hollow victory. In the same way that a stable life is impossible to achieve without money, it’s immediately evident that this small amount of money will not be able to fulfill the men. That they themselves have sacrificed their personal relationships to get it—using the maid and, at times, suspecting each other of betrayal—makes clear the cost of reducing interpersonal connections to transactional, monetary terms.



BETRAYAL

“Two Gallants” is full of betrayal and the fear of being betrayed. Corley is exploiting and thus betraying the maid he is dating. At one point in the story, Corley fears Lenehan means to steal the maid and scam him. At another, Lenehan fears that Corley has slipped off with his winnings from the maid and abandoned him. Meanwhile, it seems likely that Corley convinces the maid to betray her

employers by stealing from them. That betrayal, real or feared, haunts all of the relationships in the story suggests that the issue of betrayal is not just one that pertains to these specific characters, but rather to Irish society more broadly.

The story has numerous moments of romantic betrayal. Corley, instead of being faithful to the maid, gossips about her to Lenehan. More importantly, his primary goal is to use her interest in him to manipulate her into stealing money for him. The entire story, in fact, leads up to this moment in which Corley uses romance to get the maid to betray her employers by stealing from them for him. Corley makes clear in his conversations with Lenehan that all of his romantic relationships are similarly founded on betrayal. Corley is not interested in the **women** he sees at all, even for sex. In every case, rather, he is using these women for what he can get them to give him, whether free tram rides or cigars. Yet the men also view the women who they are using as potential betrayers. When Corley mentions that a woman who he was actually once fond of has turned to prostitution, Lenehan at first asks excitedly if it was Corley who turned her to prostitution—the possibility that Corley’s betrayal of her led her to prostitution excites him. But when Corley responds that other men were also “at her,” Lenehan angrily describes the woman as a “base betrayer.” The men think nothing of using women but see women who sleep with others as betraying them.

But fears about betrayal are not limited in the story to romantic relationships—it’s also evident in men’s friendships with each other. For example, Corley and Lenehan’s own relationship is regularly marred by distrust. When Lenehan wants to look at Corley’s maid, Corley immediately thinks that Lenehan means to try to step in and steal her from him. Later in the story the tables are turned: Lenehan begins to fear that Corley won’t meet him as planned after getting the maid to steal the money. Though friends, the possibility of betrayal looms over them, and neither believes the other is above such deception.

That betrayal, actual or feared, defines every relationship in “Two Gallants” implies that this general sense of mistrust is pervasive through Irish society and culture. The bleak atmosphere of the story suggests a kind of circle of political and cultural betrayal, in which Ireland itself is being betrayed by ne’er-do-well citizens such as Lenehan and Corley who are uninterested in helping themselves, their fellow citizens, or Ireland itself. At the same time, through Lenehan’s simultaneous sadness at the state of his life and complete inability to do anything to change it, the story suggests that Ireland has betrayed its citizens by not adequately providing for its citizens, so that their lack of opportunities or reasons for personal or national pride drive their behavior. A further level of political betrayal involves the relationship between England and Ireland, in which England has betrayed Ireland as part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland by effectively treating Ireland as a colony, denied any self-rule and exploited

for England’s wealth. And finally, though never mentioned within the story, the pervasive theme of betrayal seems to be a product of the ongoing fallout of a real-world poisonous national scandal of the late 19th century. The Irish national hero and statesmen Charles Parnell seemed poised to lead Ireland to self-rule but was abandoned by both the Irish government and the Catholic Church after his affair with a married woman was exposed. Many Irish people felt that Parnell and Ireland itself had been betrayed by its leaders, leading to vicious recriminations and national anger.

“Two Gallants” therefore suggests that betrayal is woven into the fabric of early-20th-century Irish society at multiple levels: romantically, interpersonally, and politically. With its ending, in which Corley celebrates getting the **coin**—the success of his betrayal of the maid, leading to her betrayal of her employers—the story offers no sense that there is a way out of this personal and national cycle of betrayal.



SYMBOLS

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



WOMEN

Irish women—and the way Irish men treat them—represent the decline of Ireland under English rule. The title of “Two Gallants” is ironic. To act “gallantly” is to display nobility and courtesy, especially toward women. But neither Corley, nor Lenehan, nor any other man mentioned in the story is in any way gallant toward women. Rather, the men in the story objectify women and use them only as means to an end, be that sexual gratification or financial gain. Corley, in particular, tells joking stories about how he charms women into giving him cigarettes, tram rides, and “bloody fine cigars.” Further, the primary action of the story involves Corley trying to pull “it” off. It initially seems like Corley might be trying to get his lover (the maid) to marry him, or to have sex with him, but as it turns out he is trying to manipulate her into giving him money—either her own, or to steal it from her employer. Put bluntly: the Irish men of “Two Gallants” prey upon and use Irish women.

The story then uses the state of Irish women as a symbol for the state of Ireland itself, particularly in relation to England. Exploited for money, denied any measure of a real relationship, forced into prostitution, bereft of self-determination, and tricked or compelled complicity in the crimes of those manipulating them—the women of Ireland as depicted in “Two Gallants” are much like Ireland itself under the power of its colonial master, England. Irish men, already conquered by the English, have turned inward and conquered their own people. The men of Ireland perpetuate the colonial cycle of dominating/

dominated through their treatment of women. And the desperate state of those women—who will bear the next generation of Irish children—symbolizes the hopeless state of Ireland.



WALKING

Walking represents the general sense of aimlessness and unbelonging that plagues the story's characters. Walking is commonly thought of as a way to get to a particular destination: from point A to point B. But walking, in "Two Gallants," is not so purposeful. Over the course of the story, Corley and Lenehan meander through Dublin, and their route traces a rough circle through the city. Rather than traveling from one place to the next, the two men walk for hours and end up basically where they started: they go nowhere. Further, the story ends, significantly, as the two men walk along Ely Place—a real road in Dublin that's actually a dead end. Walking, in the story, is therefore not a symbol of purpose or direction. Quite the contrary, it symbolizes a lack of purpose, a lack of direction, and the impossibility of having either in Ireland.

Walking is also an emblem of the two men's lack of belonging. They seldom stop, and never stay anywhere for long. Lenehan gets food, talks to friends who seem distracted and disinterested, watches Corley from afar, feels lost when Corley goes off with his lover—but throughout all this, he continues walking. He walks because he can think of nothing else to do, has nowhere else to go. Walking has no destination in "Two Gallants," and represents the men's itinerant, unfulfilling lifestyle, in which the two men never truly belong or have the possibility of settling down.



HARP

The harp, the national symbol of Ireland, represents the state of Ireland under English colonial rule. The harp that appears in "Two Gallants" is being played by a street performer. This harpist plays "heedlessly" and "wearily." Meanwhile, the harp itself is personified as a **woman** who is "heedless that her coverings had fallen about her knees" and "seemed weary alike of the eyes of strangers and of her master's hands." The story's description of the harpist and harp takes this traditional symbol of Ireland and makes it a symbol of Ireland's decline. First, it connects the playing of the harp to a somewhat desperate performance, for money, connecting the harp and Irish tradition to a failing economy and transactional focus. The weariness of both the harpist and the harp further emphasizes Ireland's decline. The way that the harp is described as a woman who has been disrespected and robbed of her dignity, and who is tired of being played by the fingers of "her master's hands" first of all links the plight of Ireland to the way that men in Ireland such as

Lenehan and Corley seem to habitually and casually mistreat and exploit Irish women. But it also symbolizes the way that Ireland itself has been historically controlled, exploited, and mistreated by the English—Ireland's colonial masters. The harp in the story is a rich symbol of Ireland, Ireland's decline, and the causes of that fall.



THE GOLD COIN

The gold coin represents the transactional nature of relations in "Two Gallants." Corley, for instance, does not associate with **women** out of a desire for love or even pleasure, but for what these women can do for him financially. He brags about the things women buy him—tram tickets, cigars, cigarettes. Corley's relationships are based purely on goods and services, give and take. The story makes a joke of Corley's fundamentally transactional nature in matters of love by having him affectedly pronounce his name in a lisp, "after the manner of the Florentines"—this means that he calls himself "Whorley" rather than Corley, which of course is also a commentary on the fact that his goal in his date with the unnamed maid is not love or sex, but money. And Corley is not alone. From the woman Corley once knew who herself ended up a prostitute, to Lenehan's talent for insinuating himself into a group at a bar such that he gets included when someone buys the next round of drinks, to the **harpist** playing for money on the street, to Lenehan's friends who talk about another friend who won a bit of money at pool, basically every relationship in "Two Gallants" is transactional, is focused on making money or getting something for free.

The story is organized, largely, around Lenehan's repeated question to Corley: can Corley pull "it" off—whatever "it" is. While readers might initially imagine that Corley is preparing to ask his lover to marry him, have sex with him, or pull off some romantic surprise, by its end the story makes clear that Corley's goal is to convince the maid to bring him a "small gold coin." Whether he is convincing her to give it to him out of her own savings or, more likely, stealing it from her employers, is never made entirely clear, and isn't necessarily important. What is important is that the story ends with both its most important event—one it has been leading up to for the entire tale—and an entirely meaningless event. Corley and Lenehan now a bit more money, a circle of medal, but no meaningful human relations. The coin itself stands in place of any human connection the men could have forged. The coin symbolizes the reduction of everything to money and transaction in early-20th-century Ireland, and the loss that results from that reduction.



THE MOON

At one point in "Two Gallants," Lenehan looks up at "the large faint moon circled with a double halo." As

the mention of the “halo” indicates, the moon symbolizes the pure, divine, and angelic contrast to the world of exploitation, transactional relations, and lack of gallantry that Corley and Lenehan inhabit. Yet, while Lenehan often looks up to the moon—perhaps for a glimpse of something outside his own drab, despairing existence—the moon in the story is constantly obscured. A “grey web of twilight,” for instance, passes across the moon’s face while Lenehan looks on. At another time, the “pale disc of the moon” becomes “nearly veiled” as Lenehan looks on. The moon is always passing out of Lenehan’s vision. The moon in “Two Gallants,” then serves as a symbol of *lost* transcendence and divinity, and shows the fallen state of the two men—and of Ireland itself—as they wander through Dublin.



QUOTES

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

Two Gallants Quotes

☞ —That takes the solitary, unique, and, if I may so call it, *recherché* biscuit

Related Characters: Lenehan (speaker), Corley

Related Themes:

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

Lenehan says this after listening to and laughing about a story Corley tells him. “Recherché biscuit” is an odd phrase to use, however—*recherché* is a French term meaning “rare,” or “exotic,” and the sentence as a whole is complex—beyond the level of what would be normal in everyday conversation. Corley, being described as not particularly bright, would likely not understand the French, in any case.

On the whole, then, Lenehan’s comment indicates an intelligence and cultured nature that he does not share with Corley. This aspect of Lenehan’s character resurfaces when he walks into the Refreshment Bar later in the story, and all conversation stops due to his perceived sense of nobility. It also indicates a kind of *wasted* intelligence. Lenehan only says this to Corley, after all, who is likely not able to understand what Lenehan means. This creates a sense of paralysis and purposelessness, as Lenehan’s intellect is wasted in Dublin among the lowbrow company he keeps.

☞ Most people considered Lenehan a leech but, in spite of this reputation, his adroitness and eloquence had always prevented his friends from forming any general policy against him.

Related Characters: Corley, Lenehan

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

This description of Lenehan occurs as Corley and Lenehan walk through the streets of Dublin, laughing and joking. Lenehan, the reader learns here, has a reputation for weaseling his way into social groups and “leech[ing]” off of others. But his “adroitness,” or cleverness, and savvy social skills have made his friends grudgingly accept him. This indicates that Lenehan, besides being smart and good at talking, has to perform in order to belong in others’ friend groups.

The primary question raised by this quotation is: why does Lenehan leech off of others? The story has characterized him as smart and eloquent, so it seems that he should be able to make his own way in the world and form genuine friendships. This disconnect between Lenehan’s abilities and his unfulfilling, hollow relationships suggests that Ireland’s general social climate at this time (the early 20th century) didn’t encourage meaningful connection. It’s implied that this is because Ireland as a whole was in decline, oppressed and stagnant under English colonial rule, and that this hollow state of affairs bled into its citizens’ everyday lives.

☞ Lenehan’s gaze was fixed on the large moon circled with a double halo. He watched earnestly the passing of the grey web of twilight across its face.

Related Characters: Lenehan, Corley

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis



While Corley is bragging about his sexual exploits, Lenehan's attention is on the moon, which is encircled by a "double halo" that symbolically associates it with purity and divinity. This implies that although Lenehan tacitly condones the way Corley objectifies and exploits women, he wants more out of life—a stable job, a "good" woman he can settle down with, friendships that don't require him to put on a false persona. The fact that Lenehan isn't content with his life suggests that the shallow, aimless way he and Corley go about their days isn't a fulfilling or natural way to live. Rather, Ireland's general decline under colonialism imposes this aimlessness on them, and their aimlessness perpetuates Ireland's social and economic decline in turn.

Notably, in this moment (unlike the times when Lenehan performs a role), he is "earnest"—this is a rare moment of truth for Lenehan, unlike those times when he must "invent and amuse." Yet this moon—and Lenehan's own transcendence—is out of reach, and the twilight passing over the moon's "face" represents the fleeting nature of Lenehan's self-reflection as he resigns himself to his same old habits and ongoing sense of unbelonging and purposelessness.

☞ —Well...tell me, Corley, I suppose you'll be able to pull it off all right, eh?

Related Characters: Lenehan (speaker), Corley, The Maid

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

Lenehan asks Corley this after the two have been talking about women as they walk through the city. Lenehan's question is ambiguous—what is Corley supposed to be "pulling off?" It must have something to do with women, as he follows this question with the phrase "Is she [the maid] game for that?" This moment ostensibly pertains to Corley having sex with the maid he's been seeing. This would be fitting with Corley and Lenehan's characters, as they have bemoaned traditional courtship as a waste of time and instead prefer to take advantage of women to get sex or money from them.


However, Lenehan seems extremely interested in this point, as the question recurs multiple times throughout the story.

So, it's possible that the question doesn't pertain to sex, as the answer seems to concern Lenehan, too. Lenehan almost seems reluctant to ask the question, as well—he hesitates after saying "well," almost as if he is debating whether or not to ask Corley. The answer to this question will not be given until the story's end, but the recurrence of the question itself is significant, as it indicates Lenehan's anxiety and the degree to which he is caught up with Corley's life. This speaks to how empty and directionless Lenehan—and it's implied, Irish society as a whole—is, as he has no clear aspirations for himself and instead lives vicariously through his friend.

☞ —You're what I call a gay Lothario, said Lenehan. And the proper kind of Lothario too!

Related Characters: Lenehan (speaker), Corley

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis


This moment occurs while Corley is talking about the many ways he shows his dominance over women, and how confident he is in his romantic prowess. Lenehan calls him Lothario, a term for a man who unscrupulously seduces women. While Corley is undoubtedly unscrupulous (not listening to others, self-centered, likely a police informer), neither his personality nor appearance are seductive—the story describes him as being sweaty; having a round, oily head; and disrespecting women. Thus, Lenehan says this mockingly, though Corley isn't bright enough to pick up on it. Nevertheless, this quote speaks to Corley's lack of gallantry and Lenehan's acknowledgment of that fact.

Given that Ireland was under English colonial rule when the story is set (the early 20th century), it's implied that Corley's domination and exploitation of women symbolize the way England was dominating and exploiting Ireland at this time. This symbolism also plays into why Lenehan doesn't stand up to Corley despite disapproving of his friend's crude behavior. He, like many other characters in the story, is haunted by paralysis and lack of action, which parallels Ireland's political paralysis and economic decline at this time.

☛ —She was...a bit of all right, he said regretfully.

Related Characters: Corley (speaker), Lenehan

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 47



Explanation and Analysis


Corley says this while talking about a woman he used to have sex with, and this quote shows a softer, more regretful side of Corley than the reader sees in the rest of the story. The woman he's referring to has since become a prostitute, and Corley seems genuinely sad about this—though just after this, Lenehan implies that Corley should be proud that he had a role in driving this woman to prostitution. And, just before this, the two men bemoan the uselessness of trying to court women in the traditional way, since this never gets them anywhere.

Altogether, then, this passage speaks to Corley and Lenehan's impossible standards for women. They both covet women who are "all right" (that is, loyal and monogamous), yet they're also disillusioned with romance and take pride in their ability to seduce and take advantage of women. At this time (the early 20th century), Ireland was under English colonial rule. So, the way the men objectify and disrespect women could be read as a parallel to how England was conquering and exploiting Ireland at this time. In this way, Ireland's political situation and general decline under colonialism seems to have bled into the social fabric of Dublin, eroding relations between men and women to the point that men no longer see the point in treating women with respect or settling down to become husbands and fathers.

☛ He knew that he would have to speak a great deal, to invent and amuse, and his brain and throat were too dry for such a task. The problem of how he could pass the hours till he met Corley again troubled him a little. He could think of no way of passing them but to keep on walking.

Related Characters: Lenehan, Corley, The Maid

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

Lenehan thinks this while walking around the city, after Corley has left for his date with the maid. Though Lenehan's friends generally accept him due to his cleverness and ability to charm people, this need to perform in order to be accepted exhausts Lenehan. This moment resembles the authorial influence, too—like an author, he has to "invent" and "amuse." This moment thus associates Lenehan with James Joyce himself. Both are called to "invent" and "amuse," but neither accomplish this task in a traditional way. Joyce focuses less on entertaining readers and more immersing them in the mundane drudgery of everyday life. Similarly, Lenehan, in this moment, simply reflects on the boringness and drudgery of his own life.

In this vein, it is significant that Lenehan is troubled by how to pass the time. He is not consumed with exciting and interesting tasks—on the contrary, he does not know what to do with himself when Corley is gone. It is this bleak prospect that leads him to walk—not to any destination, but just to pass the hours of his dreary life.

☛ He was tired of knocking about, of pulling the devil by the tail, of shifts and intrigues. He would be thirty-one in November. Would he never get a good job? Would he never get a home of his own? [...] Experience had embittered his heart against the world.

Related Characters: Lenehan, Corley

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 51-52

Explanation and Analysis



While Lenehan sits down to eat a meager meal of peas, he starts to think about his life. While doing so, he reflects on his discontentedness with his current situation. "Pulling the devil by the tail" means, roughly, being on the brink of financial disaster or tempting financial fate. Lenehan is aware of his own mortality, and he wishes for more out of life than being poor and directionless.

Yet despite his self-awareness, Lenehan does nothing to help himself achieve this state. He is stagnant and paralyzed in the same way that Ireland as a whole is in decline and

unable to forge its own path under English colonial rule. Despite wanting to settle down with a “good” woman, get a “good job,” and “have a home of his own,” Lenehan follows in Corley’s footsteps as Corley tricks women and talks about his sexual prowess. While “experience” has embittered Corley’s heart against the world, it would be more accurate to say that Lenehan’s own passivity and stagnancy has embittered it far more. The world has been unkind to him and those around him, but he also does nothing to advance himself or improve his homeland.

●● His friends talked very little. They looked vacantly after some figures in the crowd and sometimes made a critical remark.

Related Characters: Lenehan, Corley

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis


This moment exemplifies the unsatisfactory nature of social encounters in the Dublin of the story. Even when meeting friends, Lenehan does not have exciting or fulfilling encounters. His friends “talk[] very little,” which could be because most people think Lenehan is a leech. On the other hand, maybe Lenehan’s friends are also absorbed in their own unhappiness and do not want to talk to anyone, and Lenehan’s own personality is irrelevant to them. The fact that they look “vaguely” into the crowd indicates a lack of engagement in their current situation. Like Lenehan, perhaps these friends are not “living in the moment” but simply passing the hours of their life. This would suggest that the discontentedness and aimlessness Lenehan feels throughout the story isn’t specific to him—it’s a widespread problem in Ireland, implying that Ireland’s economic and social decline has left young Dubliners feeling lost and paralyzed when it comes to changing their circumstances.

Notably, because Lenehan’s friends sometimes made critical remarks, it seems as if they are unhappy with their lives but choose to look elsewhere to make criticisms. Like Lenehan, they perhaps look outward for the causes of their discontent instead of actively changing their lives. Either way, this is a social encounter that is far from fulfilling—for both Lenehan and his friends.

●● He knew Corley would fail; he knew it was no go.

Related Characters: Lenehan, Corley, The Maid

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

Lenehan thinks this while watching Corley and the maid return, both walking very quickly and not speaking. Lenehan’s readiness to believe in Corley’s failure to “pull it off” with the maid (though it’s still unclear at this point what “it” is) indicates a lack of confidence in his friend, and a knowledge of Corley’s lack of talent and power of seduction. This calls to mind the threat of betrayal that hangs over the story and suggests that relationships in the Dublin of the story—even between seemingly close friends like Corley and Lenehan—aren’t particularly deep or trusting.

Lenehan’s certainty, indicated by his use of the word “knew” (twice) shows he is already on the brink of despair, even before Corley arrives. He is all too willing to believe in his friend’s failure. Haunted by his discontent with his own life, Lenehan is quick to believe in a “no go”—a phrase that indicates the state of Corley and Lenehan’s lives, stagnancy rather than forward movement. This paralysis haunts the characters in “Two Gallants,” and thus, Lenehan is all too quick to predict Corley’s own stagnancy.



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.

TWO GALLANTS

On a balmy August Sunday, two men named Corley and Lenehan **walk** past Rutland Square in Dublin. Corley is telling Lenehan a long story while walking in a thoughtless way, repeatedly forcing Lenehan off the sidewalk and into the street. Lenehan nevertheless laughs expressively while listening to the story and is visibly amused, constantly glancing at Corley's face. Though Lenehan is young, he looks careworn and "ravaged," with grey hair and a bulging stomach. When Corley finishes the story, Lenehan enthusiastically replies, "That takes the [...] biscuit!"

Immediately after making this comment, Lenehan becomes "serious" and "silent"—talking all day at the pub wore him out. Though "most people consider Lenehan a leech," his friends don't ostracize him because he's savvy in social situations. He is adept at hanging around the edges of a social group at a bar until they accept him as one of the group and include him in the next round of drinks. No one knows how Lenehan makes a living, though it's generally believed that he's somehow connected to the cheap newspapers that cover horse-racing.

Corley and Lenehan's conversation shifts to **women**, as Lenehan asks Corley where he met an unnamed housemaid whom Corley has "picked up." This "fine tart," as Corley puts it, not only provides sexual favors but also brings him cigarettes and expensive cigars. She also pays for his tram ride to and from their rendezvous. Corley says he worried that the maid would get pregnant, but she knows to avoid that. Lenehan comments sarcastically, "Maybe she thinks you'll marry her." Corley replies that he's too clever for that: he hasn't even told the maid his name and has both told her that he is employed and unemployed.

The way Corley carelessly forces Lenehan into the street as they walk indicates his selfish, thoughtless personality—it seems that he only cares about impressing Lenehan with his story, not about his friend's well-being. Lenehan seems immune to Corley's thoughtlessness, though, indicating that he doesn't expect any better from his friend—or perhaps that he doesn't think he deserves any better. As Lenehan's ravaged description indicates, life has beaten him down despite his young age. He manages to maintain a façade of happiness around Corley, though. The way he continuously looks at Corley's face to see if he (Lenehan) is reacting the right way suggests that he's constantly performing in order to be accepted.



Lenehan's performances tire him out—maintaining a persona in order to belong is exhausting. He must act strategically in order to be included in social situations, and even then, "most people consider Lenehan a leech" because it's obvious that he's partially motivated by wanting people to buy him drinks. In this way, it seems that Lenehan's relationships are shallow and transactional rather than rooted in genuine connection.



The two men do not discuss women with respect. Instead, the crude phrases "picked up" and "fine tart" imply that the men see the maid as a sex object whom Corley is using. And, like Lenehan essentially manipulates people to include him in social situations and buy him drinks, Corley exploits the maid to buy him things. It seems that his desire for money has replaced genuine human interactions based on love. Lenehan knows Corley does not mean to marry the girl, and indeed, Corley's fear of the maid getting pregnant implies that he has no interest in being a husband or father—he's only using the maid for his selfish ends. Though the story is titled "Two Gallants," then, this incident illustrates that Corley is far from gallant, and Lenehan does nothing to stop Corley's habits.



Corley is the son of a police inspector and inherited his father's build and stature. His "large, globular and oily" head glistens and sweats constantly, no matter the weather. Corley is out of work and is not interested when his friends tell him the unpleasant information that there are jobs available. It seems likely that he makes what money he does by being a police informant. He enjoys making bold pronouncements, monopolizes conversations, and mostly talks about himself.

Though Corley comes from a family with money and some level of status, he is portrayed as downtrodden and lazy—he could find an honest job but just doesn't want to work. His sweatiness and "large, globular and oily" head subtly imply that Corley is greasy or slippery in both a literal and a figurative sense—he is dishonest and flatters people in order to get what he wants from them. This also applies to his job as a police informant, which likely involves ingratiating himself with people only to betray them to law enforcement.



As the men **walk** through the city crowds, Corley regularly smiles at **girls** they pass. But Lenehan becomes absorbed in looking at the **moon**, which is "circled by a double halo."

While Corley is absorbed in his womanizing activities, Lenehan's attention is on the moon, something that transcends earthly concerns altogether. The moon's "double halo" gives it an angelic appearance, associating it with divinity and purity. In this sense, the moon symbolizes Lenehan's longing for something more meaningful than sex and money. This begins to suggest that the way Lenehan and Corley are—aimless, restless, and manipulative—is perhaps a product of their society rather than what they genuinely want, and that this is an unnatural and unfulfilling way to live. But the moon's distance suggests that a more meaningful way of life is out of reach in Dublin.



Still **walking** through the city, Lenehan asks Corley if he can "pull it off." Though what, exactly, Corley is "pulling off" remains ambiguous, it must refer to the maid Corley is meeting, as Lenehan asks "Is she game for that [...] you can never know **women**." Corley replies that he knows the way to "get around her." Lenehan enthusiastically calls Corley a "Lothario," though the narrator notes that Lenehan's seeming "servility" is undercut by mockery that Corley isn't able to notice.

Lenehan's question sets up an expectation that Corley is trying to have sex with the maid—"pull it off" could refer to convincing her to sleep with him. Lenehan jokingly calls Corley a "Lothario," a term for an uncaring and unprincipled seducer. But while Corley might take this as a compliment indicating his sexual prowess, Lenehan seems to see some of the situation's unpleasantness. By mocking Corley, he shows his awareness that Corley is probably not very alluring to women, and that the whole situation is rather cheapened—not at all like a Lothario's seduction.



Corley and Lenehan then discuss Corley's romantic exploits. Corley asserts he was once a good, honorable lover who would buy **women** things and take them out on dates. But both men agree that these traditional, honorable romantic encounters are a fool's errand that never yields anything in return. Corley adds that he did get something "off of one of them," though. For a moment, Corley stares at the **moon** and sadly says that this woman was "a bit of all right." Then he notes that she is now a prostitute. Lenehan says that her becoming a prostitute must be Corley's doing, meaning this as a kind of compliment. But Corley only replies, "there was others at her before me," to which Lenehan responds, "Base betrayer!"

Now **walking** past Trinity College, Dublin, Corley is about to meet up with the maid for a date. Before he heads to the meeting point, though, he tells Lenehan that he always lets the **woman** "wait a bit" before he meets her. Lenehan laughs at Corley's wily ways, and asks again if Corley can "bring [the job] off." Corley, annoyed, reassures Lenehan that he will. He adds that the maid is a "fine decent tart."

Still **walking**, Lenehan and Corley see a harpist playing "heedlessly" while glancing around at his listeners and also sometimes "wearily" upwards at the sky. The **harp**, "heedless that her coverings had fallen about her knees," is also described as seeming weary of both "the eyes of strangers and of her master's hands." The "mournful" music accompanies the men as they walk.

Corley is genuinely sad that the woman he once dated is now a prostitute, but he's seemingly unaware of the fact that he and Lenehan have impossible standards for women. Part of them seems to want a woman who's entirely pure and chaste, as represented by the way they shame the woman for having other men "at her" before Corley, and by the way they gaze at the moon, which symbolizes purity. Yet they've also become cynical about courtship and romance and expect women to have sex with them—Lenehan even suggests that Corley driving a woman into prostitution is something to be proud of. Notably, in the early 20th century (when "Two Gallants" is set), Ireland was a colonial state under English rule. So, the way Corley and Lenehan conquer, objectify, and exploit women mirrors the way England was treating Ireland at this time.



Corley is up to his old ungallant ways—a gentleman wouldn't make a lady "wait a bit," but Corley is no gentleman. Lenehan does nothing to try to change Corley, though, instead going along with Corley's idea and laughing. They again objectify the maid by referring to her as a "fine decent tart" and are only concerned with Corley's ability to "bring [the job] off"—presumably, to have sex with her. This again points to a decline in relations between men and women that symbolizes the decline in relations between England and Ireland. Moreover, Corley and Lenehan seem content to continue walking aimlessly around Dublin, an activity that symbolizes their general restlessness and lack of purpose in life.



The harp is a national symbol of Ireland, and it's significant that it's being played "heedlessly" by a weary man. This represents Ireland's plight at this time: the story implies that the country is being carelessly played upon by colonizers and by men like Lenehan and Corley, who do nothing to better themselves or their country. Thus, the "mournful" music symbolizes the mournful state of Ireland itself.



Corley suddenly sees the maid on a street corner. She is dressed in a blue dress and white hat. Lenehan excitedly says he wants to get a good look at her, to which Corley slyly and angrily asks if Lenehan is trying to steal his **woman** and take his place. Lenehan reassures Corley that he has no intentions of taking his woman—he only wants to look at her. Corley is satisfied and says Lenehan can **walk** by as he talks to the maid. Corley walks off to meet her, agreeing over his shoulder to meet Lenehan later that night at the corner of Merrion Street. Lenehan calls out “work it all right now” to Corley’s retreating figure, but Corley does not answer.

Lenehan watches Corley speak to the maid, noting that Corley’s “bulk, his easy pace and the solid sound of his boots had something of the conqueror in them.” Corley approaches the maid “without saluting” and immediately begins talking to her up-close. She laughs at several of his comments.

Lenehan **walks** past Corley and observes the maid dressed in her “Sunday finery.” He notes her heavy perfume, “ragged black boa,” corsage of flowers pinned to her jacket with the flowers stems pointed upwards, and her blunt features and healthy complexion.

Once Lenehan passes and is alone, he takes on a different persona than that he had had when he was with Corley. His “face look[s] older,” and “his gaiety seem[s] to forsake him.” He thinks back to the **harp** player he saw earlier, and “the air which the harpist had played began to control his movements.” His feet **walk** in time to the melody, and his fingers “swe[ep] a scale of variations idly along the railings after each group of notes.” Becoming increasingly morose, Lenehan meditates on how “trivial” his surroundings are, and he avoids responding to the glances of those around him. He finds himself too exhausted to engage in social interaction, to constantly have to “invent and to amuse.” He worries about how he will pass the time until he once more meets with Corley—ultimately, he can’t come up with anything to do other than to just continue walking.

It is ironic that the maid is dressed in blue and white—colors that are associated with the Virgin Mary in Catholicism, the dominant religion in Ireland—because her meeting with Corley is far from a religious encounter. The two have already had sex, and this meeting is not only for romantic purposes, but for Corley to get something from her. There is also tension between Lenehan and Corley when Corley thinks that Corley wants to steal the maid away from him. This again confirms that the men see the maid as an object to be possessed rather than a person in her own right. It also speaks to a lack of trust in their relationship—even though the men are close friends, they’re both worried the other will betray them.



Corley’s association with a “conqueror” immediately places him on the side of those who have let Ireland down—like the English colonizers. Not saluting, and thus not showing the maid respect, Corley comes off as arrogant and self-interested.



This moment is ironic, as the maid’s “Sunday finery” is ostentatious and cheap—not the sort of outfit usually worn to church. With her “ragged” boa and flowers pinned upside down, the maid is attractive and in good health but far from elegant or modest. This is even more ironic considering she’s dressed in colors associated with the Virgin Mary, as the maid is no saintly figure.



With Corley gone, Lenehan’s performance stops, and his real feelings shine through. His preoccupation with the harp, and the image of Lenehan moving to the mournful music’s melody, symbolize his discontent with his life and with the state of his country. Though Lenehan was eager to live vicariously through Corley and catch a glimpse of the maid, he now seems “older,” and his former “gaiety” has dissipated, suggesting that he isn’t satisfied with the same shallow pursuits that Corley enjoys. Rather than “invent[ing] to amuse,” Lenehan seems to long for more meaningful relationships and a sense of purpose, yet he is paralyzed when it comes to actually carving out a better life for himself. Ireland as a whole was similarly paralyzed at this time, stagnated and unable to forge a path for itself while under English colonial rule. The futility and stagnation Lenehan feels (and that the whole of Ireland was experiencing) are symbolized by his urge to just keep walking—not to anywhere, not for anything, but just to walk.



Eventually, Lenehan notices a shop selling food and drink. He looks around, then quickly steps inside. Though he's very hungry, he doesn't order the ham or plum pudding on display. Instead, he gets a very inexpensive plate of peas and a bottle of ginger beer. When he orders, he tries to speak in a less upper-class fashion to "belie his air of gentility," which had caused everyone to fall silent when he entered the shop.

Including this uneventful passage in the story contributes to its overall sense of mundanity and aimlessness, though it also suggests that these kinds of mundane moments are worth telling a story about. Lenehan's meager meal of peas and ginger beer highlights how far he's fallen since his upper-middle-class upbringing. His decision to disguise his accent, in order to "belie his air of gentility," suggests that he is embarrassed of his personal decline and feels pressured to conform with the lower-class clientele in the shop.



Lenehan finds the food delicious and eats it quickly. Then, as he sips the ginger beer, he imagines Corley and his lover's adventures, and particularly Corley's "gallantries" and the maid's "leer." Thinking of all this, though, makes him feel sad, both for his lack of money and lack of spirit. He is tired of being on the brink of financial disaster and vagrancy, as he is almost 31 years old. "Would he never get a job?" he asks himself. "Would he never have a home of his own?" He thinks about the limited worth of his unsettled lifestyle: "experience had embittered his heart against the world" and his own life. He remains hopeful, though, that he can "settle down in some snug corner and live happily" if he only can find the right **woman** and enough money.

Lenehan lives vicariously through dreams rather than reality. The reader knows, of course, that Corley is no gallant, but Lenehan chooses to believe that Corley is engaging in "gallantries," perhaps to maintain a willful illusion of his friend's nobility. He fully acknowledges his discontentment with his own life—he wishes for more, for something better than helping Corley with his tricks and walking the streets pointlessly. Lenehan's financial poverty is intertwined with his social poverty (that is, his lack of fulfilling relationships), implying that Ireland's downtrodden state bleeds into all aspects of its citizen's lives. Yet Lenehan's internal state offers some hope for the betterment of his life—and of Ireland, too—simply through the fact that he takes the time to reflect on himself.



After paying his bill, Lenehan **walks** out into the street again. He meets some friends and stops to talk to them, "glad that he could rest from all his walking." His friends ask after Corley but otherwise say little. Lenehan and his friends then discuss a mutual friend, who apparently won a little money in a billiards match, and how another friend bought a round of drinks the day before. Then, Lenehan leaves his friends and continues walking.

Lenehan longs to rest "from all his walking"—which implies that he also wants to find a way out of the restlessness and aimlessness that walking represents. This interaction with his friends seems cursory and unfulfilling: they halfheartedly discuss trivial matters, then leave. It is far from a meaningful interaction, and the friends don't seem deeply engaged with one another. Like everything else in "Two Gallants," the conversation is fraught with discontentment and futility.



It's now 10 o'clock at night, 30 minutes before Lenehan said he would meet Corley. Lenehan hurries to his meeting point with Corley—he wants to be there in case Corley arrives early from his date—and then watches for Corley's arrival. He wonders "if Corley had managed it successfully," and if "he had asked her yet or if he would leave it to the last." Lenehan's excitement grows as he imagines these possibilities, but he is "sure Corley would pull it off alright." Then, suddenly, Lenehan wonders if Corley has gone home another way and has decided not to meet him at the prearranged meeting point. His anxiety grows as he debates whether Corley would "do a thing like that." He angrily decides that Corley would, in fact, do a thing like that, and throws his cigarette into the road "with a curse."

At just this moment, however, Corley appears with the maid. Lenehan is initially thrilled to see them, but then he notices that the couple is **walking** quickly and not speaking. Immediately, he thinks Corley has failed.

Lenehan again follows Corley and the maid. Soon, they stop in front of a townhouse, and the maid goes into the house through the basement entrance while Corley waits outside. A few minutes later, the maid rushes out of the front door of the building and meets briefly with Corley before running back up the steps and into the house once more.

Corley begins to **walk** away, and Lenehan races after him, calling his name. Lenehan asks Corley eagerly if he pulled "it" off. Corley doesn't answer, and Lenehan feels anxious, as well as confused and angry. "Can't you tell us?" Lenehan asks. "Did you try her?" Corley stops walking and holds out his hand toward Lenehan, smiling. "A small **gold coin** shone in the palm."

Again, Lenehan is living through his imagination, rather than reality, as he anticipates Corley's arrival. His interest in Corley's date, wondering if "Corley had managed it successfully" or "if he would leave it to the last" suggests that Lenehan is trying to live vicariously through Corley's sex life—or perhaps that Lenehan has some other investment in whatever "it" is. Lenehan's excitement turns to anxiety, though, as his constant fear of betrayal and lack of trust in Corley come to the fore. Though the two are friends, Lenehan's willingness to believe in Corley's betrayal shows that Lenehan is aware that Corley isn't a good friend or a morally upright person. Lenehan still associates with Corley, though, which speaks to Lenehan's passivity and yearning to belong.



Lenehan is willing to let his hope and faith in Corley to fade almost immediately. This illustrates the lack of trust Lenehan feels in his so-called friend, and the cheapness of their friendship. It's important to note that at this time, Ireland had just been through a kind of national betrayal: the statesman Charles Parnell, who could have led Ireland to self-rule, had been embroiled in an extramarital affair, prompting the Irish government and the Catholic Church to reject him. So, this ever-present sense of betrayal lurking beneath relationships reflects Ireland's climate of political betrayal in the early 20th century.



Lenehan is constantly looking on but never engaging, which reflects his inner sense of unbelonging. He is always on the outskirts of social groups, an onlooker in his own life.



The fact that Corley doesn't answer immediately is likely a technique to build up tension and anticipation, since Corley loves to be the center of attention—and Lenehan takes the bait. But all of Lenehan's anxiety, constant questions, and imaginings have led up to an anticlimactic ending: all Corley got from the maid is a single coin. It's implied that this is what the men have been referring to when they've discussed Corley "pulling it off"—he has convinced the maid to commit petty theft and rob her employers. The end of the story, like Lenehan's life and like Irish society as a whole, is hollow and unfulfilling.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Casey, Leah. "Two Gallants." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 20 Aug 2021. Web. 20 Aug 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Casey, Leah. "Two Gallants." LitCharts LLC, August 20, 2021. Retrieved August 20, 2021. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/two-gallants>.

To cite any of the quotes from *Two Gallants* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Joyce, James. *Two Gallants*. Penguin Classics. 1993.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Joyce, James. *Two Gallants*. New York: Penguin Classics. 1993.