『제임스 조이스 저널』
제3집(1997) 119 - 132

The Enigmatic Chance: Maria's Plight

Hee-Whan Yun

In contrast to such pathetic stories of failed marriage as "A Little Cloud" and "Counterparts," Joyce pays attention to the possible danger lurking in celibacy, physical and spiritual isolation in "Clay" and "A Painful Case." In these stories, Joyce illustrates a different mode of life through the detailed exploration of consciousness of a poor, ignorant, reluctant but contented spinster, and a rich, sophisticated and confirmed but tormented bachelor. Despite the most polished narrative surface among *Dubliners*, "Clay" remains obscure because of its subtle point of view, tone, style and ellipsis. In addition, it is hard to align Maria with other paralyzed characters, like Eveline, Corley or Farrington, because Maria, despite her limited scope of perspective, still has merits of her own: she is hardworking, friendly, stoic and peace-making. The reader's response to "Clay" goes beyond sympathetic understanding of Maria's case. We remember the delicate texture of Maria's life, even if we are aware that her self-complacency is possible only because she ignores the larger realities of life. True, "Clay" is a story about how Maria's best intentions are defeated by circumstances beyond her power, but her failure implies something other than the symptoms of paralysis. Joyce tries to show something that goes beyond the frustrated, futile, and even pointless life of a particular old woman. This paper is a gesture to reach beyond these stereotyped analyses of Maria's life hitherto.

The most remarkable thing about Maria's character is her innocuous childishness and naive sense of romance. The former quality explains her dependency and passivity as a grown-up child always manipulated by others in the narrative: the image of her blindfolded and pushed around is suggestive. With the latter quality, she transforms the real world into her own fairy tale version of reality, rejecting the world's judgment of herself. She remains unconscious of the awful reality of the world: her unconscious aloofness from the real world is evident when we see her toes barely touching the floor in the tram. (*D* 97-98) She walks on air: "She moved her hand about here and there in the air ... " (*D* 101). Wrapped up with false romance and possessing only a limited vocabulary, she enjoys self-sufficiency until she encounters moments of disenchantment on Halloween. Such a moment of moral shock povides both Maria and reader with occasions to see through the workings of her desire and its repression, either consciously or unconsciously. Maria works as a kitchen-maid at a laundry, a Protestant rehabilitation charity in Dublin where rescued prostitues read religious tracts and wash dirty (!) linen. It is a place hostile to romance. Maria, however, is satisfied with her workplace except for one thing, the "tracts on the wall" (*D* 96), because she is not an ex-prostitute who needs moral improvement. Or, because as a Roman Catholic she is forbidden to read Protestant religious tracts. In this less than genteel environment, Maria superintends the meal of the inmates, and reconciliates quarreling women, getting herself compliments from the matron: "Maria, you are a veritable peace-maker!" (*D* 95). Her relationship with her matron also seems satisfactory, and the matron allows her to have her own conservatory. She enjoys giving plants to visitors from her green-house. Maria is proud of what she makes in the kitchen: shiny boilers and well-cut barmbracks. Simply put, Maria is happy on a limited scale. Her contentment, however, looks rather hollow when we suspect that Maria accepts literally whatever compliments are paid to her, and also that she

repeats the compliments to herself with an awkward modifier like "veritable." If we consider the Maria's confidence in her moral superiority and peace-making ability, the concluding statement seems more likely to be hers rather than the narrator's: "Every one was so fond of Maria" (*D* 95).

Maria may well look forward to going out to Joe's to join the festivities. Living as she does in an institution, such a gathering will let her feel the warmth of family. Chances are that this may be one of the rare occasions on which she can go out and see her surrogate-son. Hence Maria's excitement about the pleasures in store for her: "What a nice evening they would have, all the children singing" (*D* 96). Like an impatient child waiting for an adventure, she checks her "spots of time" from Ballsbridge via Pillar to Drumcondra as well as her petty amount of money. She is meticulously conscious of the little money she can spend that evening, just like the boy going to Araby or Farrington who counts his change at the station. Side by side the excitement of the get-together on All Saint's Eve, Maria is continuously troubled by the family tragedy, because the two brothers she took care of are no longer on speaking terms with each other. She does not refer to what made them such relentless foes. She may not be able to recognize the reason for their break-up. Or she herself may be responsible. If the latter is the case, Maria's *casual* reference to her satisfaction with the independence after she got out of their house is highly suggestive. For that matter, the following is also very suggestive in its implication:

> 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.(*D* 96)

The perceptive reader cannot miss Maria's uneasiness in mentioning the unfriendly relationship between the brothers. Without satisfactory textual data concerning the background of the Donnelly family, it is risky to construct coherent narrative whole about their previous history. All we can do is to guess based on Maria's explanation, elusive as it is. We can read the quotation as a deft self-justification given her possible involvement in the break-up. The problem seems to center around where they should send Maria. It is not an easy matter to decide because Maria is not their natural mother, although she seems to behave that she, as a surrogate ("proper") mother, is entitled to be cared for by them because she has nursed them. Her reluctance to admit that she was the cause of their break-up makes her say that she of her own accord rejected the offer to live with them. She flatters herself that she was considerate enough not to make herself a burden to Joe's family. In this sense, the parenthetical explanation in relation to Mrs Donelly ("Joe's wife was ever so nice with her") is also suspicious in that it may reflect Maria's self-centeredness as well as Maria's secret desire to be nice with Mrs Donnelly. Maria never thinks of the woman as anything but Joe's wife or Mrs Donelley. In this sense, I question Maria's contention that Mrs Donelly is "ever so nice" and that Joe wants Maria to live with him. These could be just social gestures to hide the genuine feeling inside. It is hard to tell if Maria is simply ignorant of this sophistication or is repressing what she would not like to reveal. Instead of further explication, she chooses conventional generalization: "such was life" (*D* 98). She only worries about Joe's alcoholism because he can be "different" (*D* 96). Preoccupied with keeping her life in order, with cleanliness, praise, and small things, Maria does not want to disturb her interior equanimity. She willfully avoids facing the harsh realities life inevitably brings with it.

It is beyond our ability to surmise the exact reason for the brothers' enmity. One thing is clear, however: Maria is preoccupied with the past and

with her frustrated desire in the past. She not only sticks to the "pastness" of the past but also mystifies it. Maria betrays her longing for those babysitter days when everything seemed peaceful by saying that "when they were boys together they used to be the best friends" (*D* 98). Getting out of the Donnelly's has proven for Maria a successive process of adapting herself to mundane reality, while cherishing her dream of lost utopia: "she had become accustomed to the life of the laundry" (*D* 96). If sent to the laundry, she has no choice but to say that "she liked it" (*D* 96). Read from this perspective, Maria's casual statement that "Joe was a good fellow"(*D* 96) reflects indirectly her poignant frustration that Joe did not take other measure than sending her to the laundry. Accordingly, Maria's going to Joe's is no less than a ritualistic journey to comfort herself, and thus to perpetuate her fixation on the past.

Maria's fixation on the past is again evident when she adores her virginal body, unconsciously flattering herself about her sexual potential. Maria's retrogressive self-absorption is clearly betrayed in her dressing scene:

> Then she took off her working skirt and her houseboots and laid her best skirt out on the bed and her tiny dress-boots beside the foot of the bed. She changed her blouse too and, as she stood before the mirror, she thought of how she used to dress for mass on Sunday morning when she was a young girl; and she looked with quaint affection at the diminutive body which she had so often adorned. In spite of its years she found it a nice tidy little body. (*D* 97)

She unconsciously identifies herself with her younger self, which ultimately leads her to mistake her aging body as that of a young girl. The narcissistic adoration for her body poignantly reveals her repressed sexuality. Lacking any other sexual outlet, she has got accustomed to auto-eroticism,

the perversity of which also manifests itself in such phrases as "quaint affection" and "diminuitive body." Given that she is naturally a woman of small physique, the diminutiveness of her body obliquely suggests her tired sexuality and its ever-diminishing potency. It also deconstructs her amorous fantasy based on her self-delusion about the body she still finds "nice" and "tidy." As in the case of Little Chandler, Maria's physical littleness becomes a metonymic signifier for mental retardedness or limited vision which inevitably results in her distortion of reality.

Maria's self-sufficiency in her fairy tale version of life proves to be ineffectual as soon as she leaves her protected castle, the laundry. Her desire to buy "something really nice" is frustrated from the first: "It was hard to know what to buy and all she could think was cake" (*D* 98). Unconsciously she buys the same kind of items, mixed penny cakes at Downes and plumcakes at Henry Street. Moreover, the shop lady, annoyed by Maria's "choosey" manner, asks if it is for "wedding-cake." At the reference to matrimony, Maria blushes again, betraying a secret desire too ideal and too late to be achieved. What is most ironic here is that the shop lady takes "it all very seriously" as if she discerned the repressed desire of Maria. Again, Maria's untiring wish for marriage is ridiculed, which is one of the consistent motifs of the narrative.

Maria's romantic idea of marriage is again challenged when she takes a fancy to an elderly gentleman she encounters in the tram. Despite her secret expectation, young passengers take no interest in her. It is only an old man, presumably a retired British army officer, who befriends her, making a room for her. Maria's romantic version of the man as a "colonel-looking gentleman" turns out to be a delusion, and we find that he is no more than a "drunken" old man. Her fascination with the old man makes Maria emotionally confused, like Eveline when confronted by Frank's bold invitation, so much so that she leaves the plum cake in the tram. Chatting

with the stout gentleman, Maria willfully throws herself into the pleasure of romantic discourse forbidden to her: "Maria agreed with him and favoured him with demure nods and hems. He was very nice with her"(*D* 99). She even thinks "how easy it was to know a gentleman even when he had a drop taken" (*D* 99).

Maria is painfully awakened from the illusion of displaced satisfaction when she cannot find the plumcake she specially picked up. Maria's role as a magnanimous giver is completely shattered when she makes a fuss finding the lost plumcake. Worse still, her suspicious manner makes the children resentful against her: they "looked as if they did not like to eat cakes if they were to be accused of stealing" (*D* 99). Maria's self-complacency as a peacemaker suddenly gives way when she acts in the opposite manner, making all the children feel embarrassed. Indeed, to the Donnelly children, Maria becomes nothing less than a witch. She for the first time in the narrative confronts with the poignant reality of her failure and feels deep chagrin for her folly:

> 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. (*D* 99-100)

This is one of the major moments of epiphany in the narrative. But here we cannot expect any possibility of self-discovery going deeper than the level of emotional distraction, because we know how limited Maria's mental scope is. Hence our deep compassion for Maria's humiliating frustration in spite of her best intentions. She paid too much --- "two and four" is considerable sum for Maria --- for her momentary and delightul "confusion" in the tram.

Maria's vexation and disappointment are understandable but "shame" again suggests some sort of suppressed interest, either sexual or matrimonial.

Maria's broken equanimity is restored by Joe's soothing hospitality, as he tells her about the happenings in his office, which prove to be of no interest to Maria, since she cannot understand the tension between Joe and his employer. Maria, ironically, "rubs [Joe] the wrong way" (*D* 100). First, Joe gets angry because he cannot find the nutcracker for Maria. Maria has not asked for either a nut or the nutcraker. She annoys Joe, in spite of herself. Second, Maria, out of good will this time, evokes from Joe both maddening fury and an unreserved curse against Alphy, by referring to the delicate topic. Maria does not recognize that the reconciliation of the brothers is beyond her ability. Maria's innocuous wish to "put in a good word for Alphy" (*D* 100) eventually makes her apologetic: "Maria said she was sorry she had mentioned the matter" (*D* 100). Once again, Maria puts the family in emotional turmoil which is scarcely calmed down by Joe's self-control "on account of the night it was." (*D* 100). Maria's self-imposed role of peacemaker exposes again how fruitless her romantic approach to the complexities of life is.

The plum cake is gone, spoiling one of the two projected treats of Halloween. It is time to play a divining game --- involving saucers on a table, a ring, water and prayerbook. When the children insist on blindfolding Maria, she again laughs heartily "till the tip of her nose nearly met the tip of her chin" (*D* 101) like a witch, because Maria possibly desires to pick up the ring. As it turns out, however, one of the next-door girls gets it. Maria's secret wish is again defeated. Instead, she touches something that makes everyone embarrassed.

> She felt *a soft wet substance* with her fingers and was surprised that nobody spoke or took off her bondage. (*D* 101, italics mine)

Maria seems to be shocked more by not having picked up her most desired object rather than by the significance of what she has picked up: the token of approaching death. Schneider, Henke and Kenner agree in reading the clay as a symbol of living-death which Maria's marginal existence suggests. Schneider proposes that Maria's early death can hardly be the case. He surmises, rather, that "hers is a slow psychic death, a death that has set in a long time ago." Henke also points out the "death-in-life" of Maria in her service in the Protestant shelter, "where she is trapped in life-denying celibacy without spiritual consolations of religious commitment." Kenner goes one step further by saying that Maria herself is "clay" as humanity itself. For man was created from clay as we read in Genesis. Seen in this perspective, we can see Maria's case as emblematic of the universal frailty of mankind, which occasionally subjects us to such unexpected moments of embarrassent that make futile even our well-meaning efforts. It raises questions about our responsibility for what happens despite our best intentions in life. Life is such a queer thing that it sometimes brings with it happenings that are beyond our knowledge or control. When encountering such occasions, we, like Maria, feel frustrated, disenchanted and even exasperated. We can analyze Maria's successive perturbation and frustration, but we cannot blame her for what happened that evening. The moral power of "Clay" comes from Maria's radical innocence which repeatedly puts her in unexpected situations of awkward consternation. For example, the neighborhood girls are scolded by Mrs Donelley for the impropriety of including clay in the game, because "that was no play" (*D* 101). If somebody else had picked up the clay, the situation might have been different, bringing much laughter in the parlor. Maria plays again, contrary to her intention, the role of a witch who breaks up the festivity of the evening.

At a second trial, Maria picks up the prayer-book, much to her disappointment, since it foretells that Maria is to enter a convent before the end of the year and her hymeneal future is once again deferred. Ironically,

the laundry where Maria works proves to be as good as a convent, a religious institution geared to the rehabilitating the imprisoned prostitutes. Together with clay, the prayerbook describes the current condition of her living, a condition of stagnation with no prospect of a man, money and longevity. Still, Maria feels that she *is* happy. Not even knowing the ominous significance of her choices in the saucer-game, Maria regains her self-complacency, summarizing the gathering as full of "pleasant talk and reminiscences" (*D* 101). As a matter of fact, we have witnessed so far a repeated ebbing and flowing of emotional disorientation that makes all participants in the game uncomfortable throughout the evening. Maria is not exempt from the emotional turbulence she unconsciously causes. Even if she cannot read the delicate change of mood and atmosphere at the Donnelly's, she must sense that something is going wrong, that she is rubbing the wrong way, without knowing why. Such confusion explains why she frequently resorts to blushing, laughter, and omissions throughout the evening. It finally leads her to repeat the same song again, without even noticing it. The song she sings is significant not only because the lyric summarizes the whole gamut of her desires but also because it betrays by the ellipsis the mechanism of her repression.

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 love me still the same. (*D* 102)

The lyric, like that of *Silent, O Moyle* in "Two Gallants," has a rich intertextual implications. The words, heavy-laden with romantic fantasy, betray how far from Maria's sordid circumstances is the aristocratic life of feudal elegance she celebrates in the song. The song clearly reveals that Maria's aspirations are far more amorous and secular than she admits to the reader with a modest blush, and that she seeks to escape from her pitiable fate into an imaginative ancestral world of love, ceremony and wealth. Whether or not Maria's mistake is a Freudian slip, it reflects Maria's hidden desire and repression. Unlike Arline, the heroine of Balfe's *The Bohemian Girl*, who is deeply committed to love, Maria cannot bring herself to the sort of love of "real" dedication described in the song. For Maria, as an exemplary Catholic spinster, an imagined love is more than enough. Chances are that Maria has been enclosed in her self-love so long that she may be incapable of standing romantic courtship or enjoying the "steamy" consummation of love through conjugal devotion, which are emphasized in the song that she omits. Therefore, tragically, she tacitly acknowleges her future life of isolation, sterility and stagnation, as she has chosen prayer and death as her fate.

The terrible thing is that Maria is once again deceived by those around her: "But no one tried to show her her mistake" (*D* 102). On the surface, such a gesture can be interpreted as consideration, but it turns out to be devastating for Maria. On deeper level, the Donelleys' attitude toward Maria perpetuates her entrapment in a self-complacency based on her delusive vision. In this sense, both the workers in the laundry and the Donnelly family establish a sort of complicity to protect Maria from the stark realities of life as well as from the complexity of human nature. Of course, her acquantainces are not wholly to blame, because Maria's own lack of intellectual or emotional sophistication also contributes to her enclosed vision and limited perspective. Maria's mode of being is not living her life, but

acting it, because she deals with nothing serious, takes no responsibility, and above all, does not allow herself to feel. Joyce tries to show in the narrative, I argue, how Maria does live up to her own false standards and the price she pays for that.

Despite Maria's mistake, Joe bursts into tears on hearing his favorite song, saying that "there was no time like the long time ago" (*D* 102). Why does he experience such an abrupt emotional explosion? Are they "easy" tears or not? Several things need to be considered here. Has he become sympathetic with Maria's "unnoticed" folly, or does he feel repentent for the pain he has caused Maria? Possibly, Joe is yearning for the good old days when both he and Alphy shared brotherly love. (We should remember here that he named his eldest son after his brother.) He simply wants to escape from his occupational burdens and brotherly enmity into the maternal protection of Maria. The more insulated Maria is from the worldly matters, the better for him. Hence his nostalgic longing for the past represented by Balfe's opera. Considering that he was animated that evening by antipathy against his brother, the resolution of his hurt feelings by a sudden burst of tears seems quite proper. Second, Joe, for all his kindness toward Maria, may feel some sort of ambivalent feelings about Maria's situation, which has, I suspect, something to do with his break-up with Alphy. If this is the case, Maria's innocent folly might have stimulated his repentent feelings toward her. Why does Joe look for the missing corkscrew? He may want to treat Maria to a glass of wine not as merely formal gesture but out of genuine affection, or he may simply want to hide his awkward feelings of repentence. Whatever the reason, it is Joe who experiences a purification of his soul with flooding tears. In this sense, the epiphany is not Maria's but Joe's, even if the spiritual content of his revelation remains undecidable.

Even though Maria never achieves self-recognition in "Clay," it still is *her* story, that of an elderly peacemaker with witch's profile. True, Maria's

tragic flaw is that she does not see what she would not like to see. She sees things indeed, but does so darkly through "her" blindfold. She is trapped in an insulated space of infantile self-absorption. Her selective domestication of experiential data, making them suitable for her microcosmic perspective, prevents her from achieving a balanced sense of view. Maria's diminutive world has its own charm, but it undeniably carries a certain odor of celibate sterility. It is also frequently threatened and invaded by the inscrutable powers of chance, accident and fate, which she cannot comprehend. She therefore feels confused, baffled, and disappointed, but does not know exactly why. She does not even notice how many times her self-delusion has been deconstructed either by readers or by the other characters. Such a total blindness is fatal in the case of Maria, but we hesitate to include her among the paralysed characters in *Dubliners*, because she is such a cute little lady and has a certain attractiveness. With Halloween being over, we are sure, she will go to Mass early in the morning of All Saints' Day, seeking comfort from religion instead of in embrace of a gentleman. Her retrogressive journey into the past as well as into her autonomous world is distinctly expressed when she sets the alarm for six instead of seven. She is truly a nun, a self-exile in a convent of laundry where time stands still, paying no attention to outside world. If her illusion is to be broken once a year, unconsciously revealing her identity as a malfunctioning peacemaker, it is not so important, because she can remain undisturbed in her world of romance the rest of the year. Even if we continually fight against the allurement of total enclosure within ourselves, we cannot deny that illusion about oneself as well as about the world we live in is an unavoidable condition of human beings, since it enables us to endure the relentless realities of day-to-day living. If it goes too far, however, as in the case of Maria, it becomes pathological, excluding her from the rich possibilities of pain, conflict, shame and frustration out of

which, once we get over it, a terrible beauty is born! Maria lives on fantasy as Eveline lives on dust. This is their tragedy.

〈Seoul National University〉

References

Gifford, Don. *James Joyce Annotated: Notes for Dubliners and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.* Berkeley: U of California P, 1982.

Hart, Clive, ed. *James Joyce's Dubliners: Critical Essays.* London: Faber & Faber, 1969.

Heller, Vivian. *Joyce, Decadence, and Emancipation.* Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1995.

Henke, Suzette A. *James Joyce and the Politics of Desire.* London: Routelege, 1992.

Joyce, James. *Dubliners.* London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1992.

Kenner, Hugh. *Dublin's Joyce.* New York: Columbia UP, 1987.

Levin, Harry. *James Joyce: A Critical Introduction.* New York: New Directions Publishing Co., 1960.

Litz, A Walton. *James Joyce.* Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1972.

Scholes, Robert. *In Search of James Joyce.* Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1992.

Tindall, William York. *A Reader's Guide to James Joyce.* New York: Noonday Press, 1965.

Werner, Craig Hansen. *Dubliners: A Student's Companion to the Stories.* Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988.