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Is Woman a Member of Public Sphere? — A Habermasian Reading of "A Mother"

Gilyoung Oh

1

Let me pose a rudimentary question: Is women the members of the 'neutral' or 'universal' citizenship? If not, how are they excluded from the universal citizenship? How does the question of sexual difference address itself to the notion of 'citizenship' in the assumption of the 'universal' and 'neutral' subject? The idea of 'universal citizenship' presupposes the notion of homogeneity, since universal citizenship expresses a kind of general will beyond 'the private interest of each citizen'. The formation of 'universal' will is supposed to be based on the public discussion and reasoning that forms the public sphere. At stake is the nature of 'universal' will. The universal value and common interest are derived from specifically masculine experience: militarist norms of honor and camaraderie; respectful competition and bargaining among independent agents; discourse framed in unemotional tones of dispassionate reason (Young 1989, 253). What matters is that "the central categories of bourgeois thought—universal reason, law, and nature—are embedded in an ideologically sanctioned order of gender differences and public-private spheres which grounds the institutional and cultural geography of the new public sphere" (Landes 1988, 11). The 'universal' citizenship supports women's exclusion from it, inasmuch as

women are believed to lack "the dispassionate rationality and independence required of good citizens" (Young 1989, 254; Valente 1995, 262).

Among the feminist philosophers, Irigaray's project on the possibility of sexualized language and law is relevant here. She engages herself with the question of the very oppressive fiction of the 'neutral' (male) subject who asserts himself as 'the universal' and 'neutral' citizen. James Joyce's story "A Mother" from *Dubliners* refers us to questions of the myth or fiction of'universal' and 'neutral' citizenship and women's exclusion. In reading "A Mother" from a feminist perspective, I will focus on the nature of social contract which naturally concerns the historical division of the public and the private sphere. I will argue that the 'universalism' of civil rights and citizenship are rooted in the emergence of a newly transformed bourgeois public sphere (Habermas 1989; Habermas 1991). The Habermasian idea of the public sphere as an interpretive key affords a relatively new angle on "A Mother." Yet Habermas's brilliant idea of the public sphere in relation to the development of capitalism, is problematic. He does not pay much attention to the question of the gendering of the public and the private sphere. At issue is that the universal bourgeois subject is from the outset a gendered subject (Landes 1988, 158). Spivak make a similar comment on the problem with Habermas' articulation of 'neutral communication': "Since we have been talking about elite theory, let me suggest that, that is the kind of position Jurgen Habermas articulates: a neutral communication situation of free dialogue. Well, it is not a situation that ever comes into being there is no such thing. The desire for neutrality and dialogue, even as it should not be repressed, must always mark its own failure. To see how desire articulates itself, one must read the text in which that desire is expressed" (Spivak 1990, 72). Thus, a question arises: On what ground is the cultural representation of women made possible in the notion of the 'universal' and 'neutral' citizenship, insofar as the relation of representation is a hegemonic power relation? Without power, there is no representation. Representation, taken generally, means the making presentin some sense of something that is nevertheless not present literally or in fact (Pitkin

1972, 8-9). The notion of citizen naturally involves the question of power, hegemony, and the logic of gendering.

With these philosophical issues in mind, I intend here to consider the following issues in my analysis of "A Mother": the nature of the social contract, citizenship, women's exclusion from the (male) public sphere, and the question of representation. This essays aims at examining these issues through a detailed reading of Mrs Kearney's commitment to public affairs in the form of social contract, which is in nature only effective to male authority.

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Existing studies of "A Mother" have not exhausted the ways in which male authority functions in this story. In this respect, Joyce's notion of a "nicely polished looking-glass" (*Letters I*, 64) put to Dublin life may be questioned. The nicely polished looking-glass is always-already "an angled, selective one thronged by fragmented images, as notable for it does not, as for what it does, reflect" (Eagleton 1986, 21). Thus, we should pay attention to the fact that the story does not reflect reality 'transparently.' The question of representation is closely intertwined with narrative formation. We are required to be careful about the biases and predilections couched in the narrative opaqueness in "A Mother." The narrator is not neutral in Joyce's fictions. "A Mother" demands of readers an unrelaxed reading against the narration. To redress this imbalance, I will try to reconstruct the story from the perspective of the female characters, especially of Mrs Kearney. The evident biases and preconceptions in the assumedly male narrator's descriptions of the female characters present both advantages and disadvantages. The generally unfavorable narrative of Mrs Kearney provides some advantages in revealing some unmistakable problems in her 'limited' struggle with male authority. The male narrative tone also presents some disadvantages. It blinds readers to the merits and problems in Mrs

Kearney dispute with the nature of the 'universal' civil rights and social contract. Male characters' negative criticisms of Mrs Kearney echo the narrator's unfavorable description of her, although this is not merely to say that they are identical within the limits of the problem of male authority.

The story of how "Miss Devlin had become Mrs Kearney out of spite" (*Dubliners* 134; hereafter abbreviated as *D*) provides a situation where a woman positions herself in the web of social opinion governed by male authority. On the brink of spinsterhood, she cannot but get married with a bit of ludicrous self-righteousness, self-indulgence: "Miss Devlin had become Mrs Kearney out of spite. She had been educated in a high-class convent, where she had learned French and music" (*D* 134). Marriage is by definition the only choice of escape from spinsterhood. As the expression of "out of spite" reveals, her decision of marriage appears to be made out of her own will. Rather, her decision is a socially enforced choice. The sentence discloses an aspect of Mrs Kearney's personality. Marriage is likened to a business for her to do merely to escape the blame of social opinion, even though she has "her romantic desires by eating a great deal of Turkish Delight in secret" (*D* 134). She is a determined woman to silence social opinion of male authority:"However, when she drew near the limit and her friends began to loosen their tongues about her, she silenced them by marrying Mr Kearney, who was a bootmaker on Ormond Quay" (*D* 134). Mrs Kearney reminds us of Mrs Mooney from the story "The Boarding House. "Both stories deal with the issues of spinsterhood and marriage. These mothers are determined mothers, and share the narrator's ill-favored descriptions of them.

The narrator highlights that Mrs Kearney's marriage is not based on love. It is true. But Mrs Kearney's marriage without love is based on a social backdrop unfavorable to Irish women. As is evident in *Dubliners*, the danger of spinsterhood is prevalent at turn of the century Ireland. The percentages of bachelors and spinsters in Ireland were very high at the turn of the century (Walzl 1982, 34). The expression that "when she drew near the limit" pinpoints the possibility of spinsterhood. "The limit" is a socially defined limit on

women. A woman should marry within the social limit of marriageable age to ward off the label of spinsterhood.

What, then, happens to this socially enforced marriage? Here is the answer:

> She respected her husband in the same way as she respected the General Post Office, as something large, secure, and fixed; and though she knew the small number of his talents she appreciated his abstract value as a male. (*D* 139)

This description captures the gist of the hollow conjugal relationship in a middle class marriage without love and respect. Her husband is not actually a specific individual. He is reduced to a mere embodiment of "abstract value" with male authority to protect Mrs Kearney from social opinion. To state it a bit radically, it does not make a difference to Mrs Kearney who her husband is. What she requires is any man with the social title of husband. Her husband is nothing other than a kind of social image with the name of husband. He is just "something large, secure, and fixed." This expression reminds me of the famous Lacanian notion of "the phallic" who represent male authority (Lacan 1977, 281-91, 292-324). No real touch of individuality exists. The metaphor of "the General Post Office" aptly points to the question of male authority as an abstract value. The problems couched in her conjugal relationship do not merely shed light on shortcomings in her personality. She lacks a deep sympathy with others, irrespective of some circumstantial excuses for her personality. The unfavorable narrative tone toward her from the beginning is thus to some extent understandable. The shortcomings in her personality already foreclose the persuasiveness of her later rebellion against male authority, insofar as she acknowledges "the phallic" authority as "something large, secure, and fixed." Her fight with male authority is limited and defeated in the given realm of social discourse regarding the division of the male and female value.

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The inherent distance between her unfulfilled, romantic dream of a potentially independent musician, and the apparently comfortable, but unromantic reality of marriage, remains unresolved. Her unrealized dream finds its substitute in her daughter upon whom Mrs. Kearney displaces her unfulfilled aspirations. Her romantic dreams easily lead to artistic vanity when combined with her mentality of determination. Mrs Kearney is skillful enough to take advantage of social opinion. The fad of Irish Revival is just a circumstantial advantage for her in achieving her dream. Her strategy is to use social publicity in an attempt to extend female authority in the private sphere to the public sphere. But as the story progresses, this strategy proves unsuccessful because social opinion is not on her side.[1)]

> When the Irish Revival began to be appreciable Mrs Kearney determined to take advantage of her daughter's name and brought an Irish teacher to the house. Kathleen and her sister sent Irish picture postcards to their friends and these friends sent back other Irish picture postcards. (*D* 135)

The narrator is obviously not in favor of Mrs Kearney's strategy of resorting to the Irish Revival to fulfill her egoistic dream. At the same time, this passage comically sheds lights on the defects of the Irish Revival, indicating it is merely an Irish bourgeois self-sufficient fad. In taking advantage of the concert Mrs Kearney faces some unexpected hindrances from male authority. 'The Committee' appears to be another form of "something large, secure, and fixed":

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1) The power of public opinion is illustrated, in a reversed form, in Mrs Mooney's threat of public exposure of Doran's 'indecent' relationship with her daughter Polly in "The Boarding House." Mrs Mooney's cunning resort of social opinion is useful in blackmailing Doran into an unwanted wedlock. Mrs Mooney is a kind of a 'phallic mother' who skillfully takes advantages of the power of public opinion. For the definition of 'phallic mother' in Joyce's fictions, see Shechner 1974, 112-23.

> Mr Fitzpatrick, who did not catch the point at issue very quickly, seemed unable to resolve the difficulty and said that he would bring the matter before the committee. Mrs. Kearney's anger began to flutter in her cheek and she had all she could do to keep from asking: 'And who is the *Cometty*, pray?'
> But she knew that it would not be ladylike to do that: so she was silent. (*D* 139)

'The Committee,' along with the singular character Mr O'Madden Burke represents the abstract value of male authority. Mrs Kearney even derides male authority, intentionally pronouncing it 'Cometty.' In imitation of Mr Fitzpatrick's accent, Mrs Kearney snobbishly finds his 'flat', Dublin Hiberno-Irish pronunciation unacceptable. She hopes to degrade the authority of the Committee, but does so only in her thoughts. What deters her from expressing her own rights is the socially coded notion of ladyship: "it would not be ladylike to do that."

As the story progresses, she refuses to acknowledge the authority of 'the Committee': " 'I haven't seen any committee,' said Mrs Kearney angrily" (*D* 147). Dissenting from male authority embodied in 'the Committee,' she demands her own rights. She confronts the assumedly male 'Committee.' But the committee has its own way of treating her. The male organizers insist on responding to Mrs Kearney in the idiom of drawing-room propriety rather than in the vocabulary of civil law (Valente 1995, 56). When the idiom of the drawing-room is extended to the (male) public sphere, she should keep her given role as a 'lady,' submissive to the social code of the male-dominated society. Mrs Kearney comes into a dilemma. When she keeps the role of 'ladyship,' she cannot fight for her own civil rights, inasmuch as a lady would not be so rudely demanding. On the other hand, should she transgress the social code of 'ladyship' defined in the dichotomy of the (male) public and the (female) private sphere, she would be punished and even ostracized, as the ending of the story indicates. A kind of sexual division of authority is at work here.

The sexual division of authority is well rendered in the characterization of Mr O'Madden Burke. A gendered allocation of authority is given to Mrs Kearney's unrespected authority and Mr Burke's widely respected one. He is a personified symbol of male authority:

> One of these gentlemen was Mr O'Madden Burke, who had found out the room by instinct. He was a suave, elderly man who balanced his imposing body, when at rest, upon a large silk umbrella. His magniloquent western name was the moral umbrella upon which he balanced the fine problem of his finances. He was widely respected. (*D* 143)

A cynical narrative tone is sure here. The narrator keeps a distance from this 'gentleman.' Some noticeable expressions and images of oppressive male authority may be marked: imposing body, a large silk umbrella, magniloquent western name, the moral umbrella, and finances. All these elements of male authority form the social backdrop of his unquestioned respectfulness. The notion of gentlemanship is established as a part of this social power entitled to male authority. With these social properties, "He was widely respected," no matter who he really is. "The moral umbrella" is the symbolic indicator of male hegemony in the functions of social opinion. The image of "a large silk umbrella" feeds directly into the central image of the unquestioned male authority. The gentleman has the moral measuring stick to judge moral behavior. He is a symbol of the public man who acts in and for the 'universal' good. A public thing is open too, may be used by, or shared by all (male) members of the community. On the other hand, a public woman is a prostitute, and a common woman. The literal meaning of publicity is only attributed to men (Landes 1988, 3).

Far from suppressing her limited role of lady in the (male) public sphere, Mrs Kearney demands her civil right. She decides to risks doing whatever in defense of her rights:

> They thought they had only a girl to deal with and that, therefore, they

> could ride roughshod over her. But she would show them their mistake. They wouldn't have dared to have treated her like that if she had been a man. But she would see that her daughter got her rights: she wouldn't be fooled. If they didn't pay her to the last farthing she would make Dublin ring. (*D* 146)

What she does not yet realize is that social opinion is not in her favor. At first glance, Mrs Kearney looks like a monstrous mother, egoistic in her unflagging desire at the expense of her daughter's future. It is not farfetched to say that she is portrayed negatively as a mother rapacious of her young daughter. But we should, with more investigation, become wary of such impulses, and more heedful of the origins of our incipient, negative perception of her. Mrs Kearney's skirmishes against male authority run as follows:

> 'I'm asking for my rights,' she said.
> 'You might have some sense of decency,' said Mr Holohan.
> 'Might I, indeed? ... And when I ask when my daughter is going to be paid I can't get a civil answer.' (*D* 147).

The inappropriateness of the woman's question and the man's answer is not mistaken. At issue is the nature of the social contract in a hegemonic power relationship. Mrs Kearney demands a civil right, but Mr Holohan responds with a moral proposal. Her demand for a "civil answer" from male authority has two points: politeness and civil rights. Their conversation illustrates the confinement of women's civil rights in the abstract value of morality or behavior as defined by male authority. Mrs Kearney questions the very bases of civil rights: *whose* civil rights? She believes that she stands on the foundation of 'universal' civil rights. But it is only a wishful thinking. For male authority, her appeal to equal civil right does not matter. Whether her behavior and language fits the definition of ladyship is the chief concern shown in Mr Holohan's impolite response. Kearney comes to be considered unladylike, as she transgresses the hegemonically defined sexual codes of gender role. She is supposed to act like a lady and keep her place, or else be banished from the

(male) public sphere, since social opinion is, *pace* her expectation of it, at the mercy of male authority:[2)]

> 'I thought you were a lady,' said Mr Holohan walkingaway from her abruptly. *After that Mrs Kearney's conduct was condemned on all hands:* everyone approved of what the committee had done.
>
> (*D* 147; emphasis added)

The symbolic power of social opinion reigns. There exist different social codes for the (female) private sphere and the (male) public one. Woman has "the unfixed place of woman as a signifier in the inscription of the social individual" (Spivak 1988, 299). Women's governing voice is, as Mrs Kearney's relationship with her husband demonstrates, only allowed in the private sphere, no matter how superficial that is. When a woman violates this rule, she is ostracized from society. Mrs Kearney becomes dangerous to male authority. She transgresses the male domain of money and language. She is dangerous doubly when she combines her natural, fearsome power as a mother with an attempt to seize control of male, urban life, the public life of concert halls, nationalist societies, the press, and public opinion (Grace 1984, 276). Mr Burke's intervention is pertinent to the logic of this story. Mrs Kearney's ostracism from the public sphere is confirmed by Mr Burke, the representative of male authority: "'You did the proper thing, Holohan,' said Mr O'Madden Burke, poised upon his umbrella in approval" (*D* 148). At issue is the social standard of "the proper things." Who determines the standard of "the proper things"? Mr Burke's approval of Holohan's rebuttal against Mrs Kearney is the most undoubtful sign of the misused power of male authority.

Miss Healy's characterization is thus worth noting, since her 'ladylike' submission to male authority makes Kearney's rebellion ridiculous. Miss Healy

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2) The female characters who insist on claiming their rights and refuse to sacrifice them in the service of maintaining the masculine authority, are doomed to be the victims of social ostracism. Mrs Mooney in "The Boarding House," Mrs Kearney, Molly Ivors in "The Dead" are examples.

fits the social decorum established by male authority:

> Miss Healy stood in front of him, talking and laughing. He was old enough to suspect one reason for her politeness, but young enough in spirit to turn the moment to account. The warmth, fragrance, and colour of her body appealed to his senses. He was pleasantly conscious that the bosom which he saw rise and fall slowly beneath him rose and fell at that moment for him, that the laughter and fragrance and willful glances were his tribute. When he could stay no longer he took leave of her regretfully. (*D* 143)

Miss Healy's acceptable ladyship proves to be one aspect of rendering herself man's sexual object. She is fully serviceable to Mr Burke's voyeuristic sexual desire. She is likened to a sexual "tribute." Her sexual tribute to Mr Burke decidedly undercuts Mrs Kearney's endeavor to establish women's civil rights. Hegemony in the formation of social opinion is intertwined with the question of justice. Mrs Kearney demands an equal civil right. This is a request of justice. She believes 'universal' law and social contract should be maintained on a base of equality. But this is only her nave sense of civil law.[3] Law is where justice for woman is concerned. The problem of inequality of (legal) justice in the matter of sexual difference remains unresolved.

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The unenforceability of Mrs Kearney's contract is related to the question of authority. Women's authority is effective only in the domestic sphere. Joyce cautiously discloses that the male characters are not doing well in their 'public' role:

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3) Irish women's isolation from civil rights is a historical example. The 'Home Rule Bill' of 1913 left the woman of Ireland without a vote (Shloss 1994: 114). The franchise was finally extended to women in 1922.

> Mr Holohan, assistant secretary of the *Eire Abu* Society, had been walking up and down Dublin for nearly a month, with his hands and pockets full of dirty pieces of paper, arranging about the series of concerts. but in the end it was Mrs Kearney who arranged everything. (*D* 134)

Mr Holohan is actually ineffectual in public affairs. He has a title, but no appropriate action. However, the effectuality of Mrs Kearney's advice is also limited. Her advice is allowed only when she does not transgress women's social code as friendly, advising and homely. She is welcomed when she is 'homely':

> Mr Holohan called to see her every day to have her advice on some point. She was invariably friendly and advising - homely, in fact. (*D* 136)

The validity of her contract with the 'Committee' is from the start confined by and within the private sphere. Mrs Kearney believes that her contract is a form of citizenship. But it is not, for "the contract has already been privatized and so in a sense delegitimatized" (Valente 1995, 52).

A deliberate gendered distinction between the (male) public discourse and the (female) private one is prominent. She is not supposed to speak or demand publicly. Her speech is only allowed in the private space. Spaces are gendered. The gender roles and relations of patriarchy construct some spaces as 'feminine' and others as 'masculine.' This division allocates certain kinds of (gendered) activities to certain (gendered) places (Blunt and Rose 1994, 1). Women's spaces are the private arena. The permissible speaking places for Mrs Kearney are limited. Let me cite two scenes:

> i) She brought him into *the drawing-room*, made him sit down and brought out the decanter and the silver biscuit-barrel. She entered heart and soul into the details of the enterprise, advised and dissuaded: and finally *a contract* was drawn up by which Kathleen was to receive eight guineas for her services as accompanist at the four grand concerts. (*D* 136)

> ii) 'Mr Holohan, I want to speak to you for a moment, she said.' They went down to *a discreet part of the corridor*. Mrs. Kearney asked him when was her daughter going to be paid.Her daughter had signed a contract for eight guineas and she would have to be paid. Mr Holohan said that it wasn't his business.'I don't know anything about Mr Fitzpatrick,' repeated Mrs. Kearney. 'I have my contract, and I intend to see that it is carried out.' (*D* 142; emphases mine)

No public speech is allowed for women. Women are supposed to speak in such discreet places as a corridor, or a drawing room. Mrs Kearney's incessant reminders of the contract is futile, for it is ineffectual in the (male) public sphere.

The final altercation between Mrs Kearney and Mr Holohan sums up these issues of gendering. Mrs Kearney displeases 'the Committee' by transgressing the given role of 'ladyship'. She seems to commit an uncivil action. But what is the demarcating line between civility and incivility? Here is the final dispute:

> 'I'm not done with you yet,' she said.
> 'But I'm done with you,' said Mr Holohan.
> 'That's a nice lady!' he said. 'O, she's a nice lady!' (*D* 148)

Mrs Kearney is considered a possible threat to public life, "because she assumes her domestic role as 'a mother' in a public setting in which men expect her to act the only public role they consider suitable for women, that of a lady, by which they mean demure passivity" (Wirth-Nesher 1984, 289). She is allotted a public role as a lady regardless of how she sees it. Male authority defines public decorum. What Mrs Kearney transgresses is the feminine docility expected of a married woman in the public sphere. Mr Burke, the representative of male authority again confirms her, her daughter and her family social ostracism:

> Mr O'Madden Burke said it was the most scandalous exhibition he had ever witnessed. Miss Kathleen Kearney's musical career was ended in Dublin after

> that, he said. (*D* 146)

The validity of Mr. Burke's blame is unquestioned, for his indictment is equipped with socially respected male authority. Only a monolithic male language is 'official' and 'authoritative'.

The male characters do not slough off their hierarchical preconceptions and biases about what they call ladyship. The male characters collude with Mr Burke in expelling Mrs Kearney:

> The baritone was asked what did he think of Mrs. Kearney's conduct. He did not like to say anything. He had been paid his money and wished to be at peace with men. (*D* 146)

The male characters withstand dislodgment from their high seat of male authority and their benefits from it. Almost all of the male characters, including the (male) narrator, seem to easily expel Mrs Kearney from the stage of the public sphere. At the end of the story, the narrative tone decidedly tips the balance from Mrs Kearney, so that"the reader is invited to conclude that she is a dreadful creature not worth a second thought" (Grace 1984, 279). The reader's placement of blame on Mrs Kearney is well schemed by the narrator. Her counter-complaint that her right is forfeited is unheard, for she is not a member of (male) citizenship.

(Chungnam National University)

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Abstract

여성은 시민인가?
— "A Mother"를 하버마스적 시각에서 읽기

오 길 영

James Joyce의 "A Mother"는 Dubliners의 다른 이야기들과 견주어볼 때 상대적으로 소홀하게 취급되어 왔다. 그렇게 된 이유로는 여러 가지를 꼽을 수 있겠으나, 그간의 비평들이 Joyce가 이 작품에서 제기하는 핵심적 문제의식을 소홀히 한 것이 중요한 이유라는 것이 이 논문의 주장이다. 이 글의 화두는 '여성은 시민인가, 혹은 시민권자인가'라는 물음이다. Habermas가 제기한 이론적 문제제기인 '공적영역'(the public sphere)과 '사적 영역'(the private sphere)의 분리, 그리고 그에 따른 '보편적이고 중립적'인 시민개념의 정립이라는 관점을 비판적으로 검토하는 것이 논문의 서론이다. 특히, 하버마스의 '공적 영역'과 사적 영역의 분리라는 이론틀의 문제점을 여성론적 시각에서 비판적으로 검토한다. 무엇보다 Habermas는 서구 근대 시민사회에서 공적영역의 발전에 따른 '보편적이고 중립적인' 시민의 뒷면을 보지 못한다. 많은 여성론자들이 지적하듯이 '보편적이고 중립적인' 시민 개념은 공적 영역으로부터 소외되는 여성의 존재를 가려 버린다.

이런 문제의식을 갖고 "A Mother"의 주인공인 Mrs Kearney의 인물형상화를 분석한다. 강요된 결혼에 따라 처녀시절의 음악가로서의 꿈을 포기했던 Mrs Kearney는 그 꿈을 자신의 딸에게 투사한다. 서술자는 이 대목에서 어머니로서 Mrs Kearney가 보여주는 이기적인 면모를 세밀하게 드러낸다. 그러나 이야기 전체를 두고 볼 때 Mrs Kearney를 바라보는 서술자의 시각은 균형 잡혀 있지 않다. 남성의 공적 영역을 침범하는 여성에 대한 남성인물들의 불편한 시각을 서술자도 공유한다. Mr Burke와 Mr Holohan이 대표적인 남성인물들이다. 딸의 음악연주 '계약'에 관해 Mrs Kearney는 공적인 계약을 지킬 것을 요구한다. 그러나 Mr Burke나 Mr Holohan, 그리고 남성의 권위를 상징하는 'the Committee'는 그녀의 요구를 다르게 받아들인다. 여성은 '공적 영역'에서 공적

인 계약을 맺을 권리가 없다는 것이다. 따라서 그들이 보기에 중요한 것은 Mrs Kearney의 태도가 '숙녀다움'(ladyship)이라는, 남성이 부여한 사회적 약호(social code)에 부합하는가를 따지는 것이다. Mrs Kearney가 이 약호에 도전할 때 그녀는 남성이 지배하는 '공적 영역'에서 추방된다. 짧은 이야기를 통해 Joyce는 근대시민사회에서 여성의 위치, 과연 여성은 시민인가라는 중요한 물음을 압축적으로 제기한다.