

## The Adulthood Crisis of Societal Role Conformity in “A Little Cloud”

Amanda Greenwood

### I

He watched the scene and thought of life; and . . . he became sad. A gentle melancholy took possession of him. He felt how useless it was to struggle against fortune, this being the burden of wisdom which the ages had bequeathed to him. (*D* 53)

A dull resentment against his life awoke within him. Could he not escape from his little house? Was it too late for him to try and live bravely like Gallaher? Could he go to London? (*D* 63)

These quotes from the mind of Little Chandler in “A Little Cloud” succinctly summarize Little Chandler’s predicament throughout the story. The common themes of boredom, sadness, regret, restraint, escape, unfulfillment, and anxiety are present in the story because Chandler becomes aware that his disillusioned adulthood is a consequence of the poor choices made in the earlier years of his life, but not after

believing that his artistic nature was thwarted by the circumstances of his life (Herring 55). As I have explored in two previous articles, Joyce's writing reveals that Irish men underwent an intensely psychological socialization process because of the patriarchal institutions of the Catholic Church and the British Empire; as a result, the male characters experience multiple, related masculine crises that correspond to their stages of life, needing to resolve a specific patriarchal challenge (Greenwood 8). In childhood, the methods of surveillance and punishment for offenders within the oppressive patriarchal institutions of education and family cause the boys to suffer a "Crisis of Control." In adolescence, the boys awaken to the reality of their subjugation and suffer a "Crisis of Identity" as they struggle with whether or not to conform to the societal expectations imposed on them. For the Irish men who stay in Ireland, non-conformity results in alienation, failure, and anxiety, and conformity ensures that a miserable life will follow. The ability to resolve this identity crisis is an important life-changing decision to make at this stage because the choice of freedom versus societal pressure hangs in the balance.

In this critical essay, I will focus on the masculine crisis that appears in the stage of adulthood. While conformity is also present in this stage of life, the adult males are forced with confronting the questions about the inadequacies of their social roles. Are they good fathers, sons, husbands, friends, workers, Catholics, and Irishmen? If they had never conformed to society's pressures when they were children and adolescents, how would their lives be different? While many critics such as William York Tindall, Suzette Henke, Gerald Doherty, and Florence L. Walzl offer answers to these questions in the form of discussing Joyce's theme of "paralysis," what has been overlooked is the concept that this adult crisis (as well as the childhood and adolescent crises in the early stages of life) is one that all Irish men in Joyce's works face; moreover, these stages are cyclic. The adult men pass the crises on to their children, and the cycle starts over again. While this adult crisis can be applied to other stories in *Dubliners* such as "Counterparts" and "A Painful Case," my focus is on "A Little Cloud" because the text gives many salient examples of Chandler's self-reevaluation.

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The first paragraph of the story holds some simple clues to understanding Chandler's crisis. As readers, we are introduced to the character of Gallaher before being introduced to Chandler; however, the details about Gallaher, and the omission of details about Chandler, says a lot. The reader learns of Gallaher's exit from Ireland eight years prior, and his "fearless accent" refers to Gallaher's freedom to speak as he may without fear of reprisal. Chandler cannot even read poetry aloud in his own home without feeling shyness (*D* 53). Unlike Chandler, Gallaher has the freedom to give his opinion because he left Dublin for London. In addition, his "travelled air, his well-cut tweed suit" (*D* 53) shows that he is of a refined, higher class. In Dublin, he was "wild . . . mix[ed] with a rakish set of fellows . . . drank freely and borrowed money on all sides" (*D* 54). Gallaher was free, wild, talented, dynamic, and most of all, a non-conformist. The narrator also mentions that Gallaher had "deserved to win" (*D* 53) and succeed in life, so why should he be granted victory over Little Chandler? Taeun Min writes that "Gallaher reveals his freedom to roam and also his liberation from the oppressive morality of Ireland" (48), so victory shall be awarded to the man who leaves his colonized island for the continent of freedom. In addition, the changes in the eight years that had passed in London were positive for Gallaher. In Dublin he had "a shabby and necessitous guise" (*D* 53) but London had turned him into "a brilliant figure" (*D* 53). Chandler is aware of his friend's fortune compared to his, and he ruminates on how fortune has failed him during the entire story. Fortune, however, is not to blame for Chandler's life. Fortune is an arbitrary force that leads people in directions, but Chandler is responsible for his misfortune because of the decisions he made earlier on in life. Chandler is already "trapped by life" (Friedrich and Walzl 520) because of his older age. Although Joyce gives no explicit evidence of Chandler as a child or adolescent, according to my previous ideas of the childhood and adolescent crises the male characters experience, it is my assessment that Chandler has been conforming his whole life to societal expectations, as evidenced by his unhappy

marriage and monotonous job.

As a clerk, Chandler's job requires "tedious writing" and leads to him "gaz[ing] out of the office window" often. Staring wistfully through the squeaky clean glass plate of his prison, he watches the world outside change and move while he is possessed by a "gentle melancholy" (*D* 53). Clarice Short goes so far as to compare Chandler to the title character in Byron's poem "Prisoner of Chillon" (276). It is here when he first feels his life is sad and that fate laid it out for him in some cosmic pattern: "He watched the scene and thought of life; and . . . he became sad. A gentle melancholy took possession of him. He felt how useless it was to struggle against fortune, this being the burden of wisdom which the ages had bequeathed to him" (*D* 53). In addition, like the prisoner in Byron's poem, "[b]oth characters were brought to consciousness, or heightened awareness, by the advent of a visitant from the outside world" (Short 276). Gallaher's braggadocious visit from a greater land across the ocean is enough to awaken Chandler to a reevaluation of his life. Berni Benstock writes that "[t]he professional common denominator in *Dubliners* is the clerk . . . the white-collar worker with eminent claims of respectability but often with only a tenuous hold on economic survival" (193). Good clerk jobs at that time were ones which required the worker to sit at a desk, repeating the same thing day after day, such as Farrington's copyist job, James Duffy's bank job, or Bob Doran's wine merchant job. Chandler chose to enter his profession, just like he chose to not pursue writing poetry. His melancholy and unhappiness in life is a result of the choices he made as a young man. As Chandler is currently 32 years old (*D* 55), if he had left with Gallaher, he would have been 24 years old, still an adolescent according to Joyce's schema. Jeri Johnson, in her introduction of the 2000 Oxford Press edition of *Dubliners*, writes: "Joyce carefully provides within the stories the ages of most of the central characters, dropping thereby hints as to the place of each story in the overall pattern of the whole . . . Joyce uses 'the Roman names and divisions of the life span . . . childhood (*pueritia*) extended to age seventeen; adolescence (*adulescentia*), from seventeen through the thirtieth year; young manhood (*juventus*), from thirty-one to forty-five; and old age (*senectus*), from

forty-five on" (XV). Little Chandler falls into the young manhood category at age 32, thus passing the adolescent stage into the adult one.

At his desk, Chandler becomes nostalgic about his bachelor days. He missed poetry and gave up reading and writing it when he married Annie. He often thought of reading something aloud to his wife, but "shyness had always held him back" (*D* 53-54). This suggests that shyness has always been present in his life, and it is one example of why he was coerced into conformity during his childhood years, resulting in him experiencing the "childhood crisis of control" I mentioned earlier. Not having the strength of character to rebel against the patriarchal institutions of education and family when he was a child, Little Chandler was forced to submit to their authority. In the adolescent stage of his life, he was faced with the choice of conforming to societal expectations, or becoming a pariah. It seems he was not strong enough yet again to choose non-conformity, and so he settled for an inartistic job that many Irish men also settled for: a clerk. He also got married; if it is one theme in *Dubliners* that Joyce expounds upon time and time again, it is that marriage equals entrapment. Similar to Bob Doran's future agreement with Polly Mooney in "The Boarding House," marriage is "a codified, inescapable, unfulfilling constriction that protects no one and imprisons all" (French 457). It is no wonder that Joyce himself avoided marriage, finally conceding after being with Nora for 27 years (Ellmann 650).

As Chandler leaves his office to meet Gallaher at the pub, he walks past "a horde of grimy children" who "squatted like mice" and had a "minute vermin-like life" (*D* 54). He "gave them no thought" and "no memory of the past touched him" (*D* 54). The lower-class children are thought of as rodents, and Chandler's sad past is forgotten when he thinks of himself as of a higher class; however, Chandler could have attained a higher position if he had left the country like Gallaher did. He "quickened his pace" and "[f]or the first time in his life he felt superior to the people he passed" (*D* 55). Again, he is projecting his social class as being higher than it actually is because he is about to enter into the higher social world at Corless's. As Chandler thinks about his life and the life he could have had, he

becomes increasingly aware that if one wanted to succeed in life “you had to go away. You could do nothing in Dublin” (*D* 55). Chandler could not read or write poetry in Dublin. His life was sober and inartistic (*D* 55). He could not achieve a higher class. He could not obtain a better job. Each step he took towards meeting Gallaher at Corless’s was a step closer to London where artistic and individual freedom (*D* 55) was possible. These steps are also literally steps closer to London; Don Gifford’s notes on the story state that Little Chandler’s route to Corless’s is traveled east and south, almost a mile closer to London than when he was at work (69).

Chandler exhibits positivity, bravery, and liveliness when he thinks Gallaher could get a poem of his into a London paper because continental Europe equals life and freedom (just as Joyce felt, and a reason for his self-imposed exile), and Ireland equals routine and melancholia. He realizes he is “not so old” (*D* 55), but is insecure about succeeding because he is not sure of his talent as a writer. Dubliners in general have a “profound social insecurity” (Valente, “Resistance” 330), and Chandler’s dreams do not differentiate him from the average Irishman, for his “dreams here not only replay the familiar scene of Ireland’s subjection to the expectations of English but also fix him as nothing more than a poet of local color” (Latham 783). As Chandler is more aware of his imprisonment, this “coming to awareness of Chandler is far bitterer and more terrible because [it is] longer delayed” (Tindall 5). Quite simply, he knows he is too old to improve his life, and the textual evidence seems to suggest that he resents this fact.

Corless’s is a new world for Chandler in that “[t]he light and noise of the bar held him at the doorway for a few moments . . . his sight was confused by the shining of red and green wine-glasses” (*D* 56); he has never been nor knows how to act in this posh environment. He is aware that he does not belong, and so put on an air of haughtiness when he sees “people were observing him curiously . . . frowning slightly to make his errand appear serious” (*D* 56). Here, he is under surveillance from the upper class. Even Gallaher may be amused by the situation he put his friend in because Chandler sees him “leaning with his back against the

counter and his feet planted far apart" (*D* 56). Perhaps Gallaher invited Chandler to Corless's to observe how he would react to an upper class environment, with everyone aware that Chandler is an outsider. Not only is Chandler self-conscious about his general presence in the pub, but he becomes more aware of his lack of masculinity when Gallaher teases him for diluting his whiskey with water (*D* 57). When the reader first meets Little Chandler, he is described in the manner of a dandy:

[T]hough he was but slightly under the average stature, he gave one the idea of being a little man. His hands were white and small, his frame was fragile, his voice was quiet and his manners were refined. He took the greatest care of his silken fair hair and moustache and used perfume discreetly on his handkerchief. The half-moons of his nails were perfect and when he smiled you caught a glimpse of a row of childish white teeth. (*D* 53)

He is feminine and delicate, not brutish and masculine like Gallaher. Chandler is not only inadequate in his masculine role, but he is failing miserably in playing the role of a proper Irish man by not drinking a strong drink.

The conversation leads to a discussion about the lives of the "old gang" (*D* 57) that Gallaher met earlier that day, and the men that have stayed in Dublin are not well off. Chandler was not invited to that meet-up. He is an outsider, ironically pushed to the outside by the other outsiders themselves. His lack of strong drinking skills and effeminate nature could also be the reason why he was not invited, and one could imagine that gossip about Chandler by Gallaher, O'Hara, and Hogan could have been the reason why he was not invited. Nevertheless, these outsiders are considered to have that Irish masculinity that Chandler desires because O'Hara is an alcoholic, and Hogan is working for the Land Commission, a branch of the government that is well-known for corruption (*D* 230), albeit a branch that supports Home Rule. O'Hara and Hogan are examples of Irish men that are experiencing the crisis of adulthood. While the reader may not know more details about these men's lives, the fact that they are involved in alcoholism and a corrupt governmental job

are the patriarchal forces in Ireland at work.

Again, Chandler exhibits unmanly behavior and a lack of confidence when he has “trouble succeed[ing] in catching the barman’s eye” (*D* 57). He is also becoming drunk too easily as “three small whiskies had gone to his head”, leaving him blushing and feeling “warm and excited” (*D* 60). He is seen as being effeminate and non-sexual when he is described as being a “delicate and abstinent person” (*D* 60). Chandler suddenly realizes the difference between Gallaher’s “vagrant and triumphant life” and “it upsets the equipoise of his sensitive nature. He felt acutely the contrast between his own life and his friend’s and it seemed to him unjust” (*D* 61). Again, like in the beginning of the story, Chandler thinks the way his life had played out was because of some outside force, not because of the choices he made in his youth. He feels that he should have been given the same chances as Gallaher, and feels entitled to those choices. What he fails to see is that he *has* been given those choices, but because of his shyness, his lack of rebelling against the patriarchal institutions, and his conformity, he did not take advantage of those choices that opened themselves up to him. Chandler also thinks about how he and Gallaher were brought up differently. He acknowledges Gallaher was “inferior in birth and education” and was “sure that he could do something better than his friend . . . if he only got the chance. What was it that stood in his way? His unfortunate timidity! He wished . . . to assert his manhood” (*D* 61). Chandler is very self-conscious of his shy and effeminate nature, and again he is focused on his perceived lack of opportunity in his life rather than on his failure to resist the pressures foisted on him by the various colonial institutions in Ireland during his earlier years.

The last third of the story focuses on the patriarchal institution of marriage. As mentioned earlier, marriage, along with an unfulfilling job, are two signs of a male character experiencing the adult crisis of societal role conformity. As an adult, people often look back and wonder how their lives would have been different if they had chosen different paths; in Joyce’s works, the male characters have many roles, but the roles of spouse, father, and worker are the roles most played by Irish



males. Looking at every story in *Dubliners*, the male characters play at least two out of the three roles mentioned above. Marriage and children are expected, and in order to get them, a man must have a good job. Gallaher has one, while Chandler has all three. There are more expectations for Chandler to do these roles well, and it shows in his nervous and insecure character. Gallaher feels marriage is boring and dull when he tells Chandler that marriage "[m]ust get a bit stale" (*D* 62). Of course, this is a direct insult to Chandler's stale and boring life, and the readers witness this life when Chandler arrives home and finds him hopelessly henpecked by his wife, Annie. He forgets to bring her home the coffee she asked for, and we see that "[o]f course she was in a bad humour and gave him short answers" (*D* 62). Seeing that she is "of course" annoyed shows that her annoyance with her husband is something that happens often.

Chandler's marriage is only two years old, but rife with a lack of passion, coldness, and nervousness. Chandler remembers how he suffered greatly from anxiety while purchasing a blouse for Annie, and he studies her features in a photograph: her "thin tight lips" (*D* 62) and "cold eyes" that looked "mean . . . unconscious and lady-like" (*D* 63). The eyes were irritating, repelling, defiant, and without passion (*D* 63). In his own home, Chandler is "under constant surveillance of his wife" (*Min* 49) through her picture. Even the furniture is "mean" because Annie herself picked it out. The furniture that can change a house into a home does not represent him, making him an outsider in his own home. As these thoughts marinate in Chandler's mind, he asks himself, "Why had he married the eyes in the photograph?" (*D* 63). This is an important question for Chandler to acknowledge because it shows he is asking himself why he had chosen this path. He is starting to realize that he may be responsible for the way his life has turned out when "resentment against his life awoke within him" (*D* 63). He wonders if he could escape from his life, his house, his job, and move to London and live freely like Gallaher (*D* 63). His life is unfulfilling and disappointing, and freedom is not an option for him as he has not finished paying off the furniture that Annie picked out for their home. He realizes he is "a prisoner for life" when he wakes

the baby, and becomes suffocated by his cry (*D* 64). When Annie comes home and sees her son crying, she instantly thinks her husband is to blame, and “the gaze of her eyes and his heart closed together as he met the hatred in them” (*D* 64). He realizes that she thinks he is a bad father, and he realizes that her baby, not her husband, is her main concern. He feels shameful and stands in the dark (*D* 65), and “tears of remorse” (*D* 65) present themselves. His feels remorse for his marriage, his life, his uncontrollable anger and shyness, and bouts of anxiety and confusion. He respects and envies, yet contests Gallaher’s savvy cosmopolitan authority (Valente, “Differend” 431), and submits and resents Annie’s maternal dictums at home (Valente, “Differend” 431). Chandler is constantly conflicted; his job is tedious and is not affiliated with his dream of writing poetry, yet his insecurities prevent him from accomplishing anything. His conclusion is that his artistic inspirations are futile (Latham 785), and he feels a “poignant sense of the irrevocable loss of his personal freedom to choose an alternative life” (Herring 61). Chandler seems to have awoken to the reality of his situation and this self-realization makes him recoil at what has become of his life.

### III

In the beginning of “A Little Cloud,” the reader is forced to experience Chandler’s blindness to reality (French 444-45) because he sees his life as something that fate controlled. He is also unable to deal with his problems because he does not take responsibility for the decisions he has made (French 458) as a child and an adolescent, such as failing to rebel against the authority figures at school and at home, or choosing non-conformity at a time when that decision will alter the course of his life positively. As the story continues on, Chandler realizes he wants “freedom from oppression, but does not possess enough will . . . to do anything” (French 452). Not only does he lack the strength to try to change his life, but he is aware of the frightening realization that he is powerless to escape. Most

importantly, this adult crisis of societal role conformity proves to be cyclic; Chandler takes his frustrations and rage about his life out on his son (French 459), and this is probably not the first or last time that this would, or will, happen. Chandler's son will grow up and will need to experience the crises in the three stages of life himself because the "children who resent the psychological and physical abuse they experience during childhood end up inflicting the same abuse on their children in the future" (Greenwood 52). Sadly, this cycle could have been broken if Chandler had not been culpable for his own subjugation.

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## Abstract

### The Adulthood Crisis of Societal Role Conformity in “A Little Cloud”

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This critical essay focuses on how British colonial institutions adversely affected the adult male character of Little Chandler in “A Little Cloud.” Having passed through two distinct masculine crises in his childhood and adolescence, Chandler is now experiencing the adult crisis of conformity to the roles society has designated for him, such as father, husband, employee, and Irish man. Throughout the story, Chandler is forced with confronting and questioning the inadequacies of these social roles, and awakens to the fact that he is trapped in these roles for life. Joyce employs this masculine crisis to awaken the Irish people to the reasons for their own subjugation, but also to prevent the male characters from passing this on to their sons, reconfirming the cyclic destruction of colonialism.

■ **Key words:** *Dubliners*, “A Little Cloud,” masculinity, colonialism, crisis, adult, conformity, societal role  
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