

## Reading Polyphony in “A Mother”

Cheol-soo Kim

### I. Introduction

“A Mother” is categorized as one of the stories of public life, along with “Ivy Day in the Committee Room,” and “Grace,” and depicts the cultural paralysis of Dublin, through an annual concert sponsored by an Irish nationalist organization. William York Tindall, juxtaposing this story with “Ivy Day,” maintains that “[P]lainly Dublin suffers from cultural as well as political paralysis (36). C. H. Peak expounds that this story has “a strange tactic” (39) by localizing the point of interest to Mrs Kearney’s personal situation, rather than the public life of the city, and the story lacks something of the “icy detachment of Ivy Day” (39).

According to Stanislaus Joyce, this story is, along with “An Encounter,” the second story of this collection, based on Joyce’s actual personal experience, in which “[his] brother sang with John McCormack” (62) in a concert. Mary T. Raynolds compares this story to Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, defining Mrs Kearney as “a classic example of the fomenters of discord whom Dante placed in *Inferno* 28” (55), due to her penchant for creating disruption, provoked by her greediness.

As most of the characters are related to the bourgeois facets of Art, middle class and nationalistic contingencies of society, they are regarded as “somewhat more elegant than those in the committee room” (Tindall 37), thus the story is mainly focused on the language and actions of an over-solicitous mother, who is regarded to represent the Irish Church, based on her cunning manipulations of people and society by slipping doubtful items in between the old favourites, offering wine and biscuits, insisting on being paid, and excommunicating those who displease her (Tindall 37).

It has been surmised that this story serves to divulge the cultural and religious paralysis of Dublin through the colloquies and behaviors of several parties such as “the third-rate concert of ‘*artistes*’” (Tindall 36), a “frustrated and manipulative mother” (Lawrence 246), an Irish-named daughter working as an accompanist as one of the “full range of jobs typically available to women at the time” (Werner 94-95), incompetent, irresponsible and indifferent agencies, and the audience inspired by the Celtic twilight movement “as an association of feeble cultural pretensions with posturing and parochial nationalism” (Peake 39). Thus, this story is a compilation of diverse voices amidst a cultural hub, battling one another with independent value and validity.

This paper aims to trace the means with which Joyce, as an arranging writer, or a polyphonic author, manages the battle of words to construct “a unity as a higher order”<sup>1)</sup> to demonstrate the cultural paralysis eminent within the discourse of Dublin society. The next chapter will feature a brief comment on Bakhtin’s concept of ‘polyphony’ and its interpretive applications of this story.

## II. Polyphony and Polyphonic Author

The concept of ‘polyphony’ as an interpretative framework of this study is

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1) Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1984), p. 298. Hereinafter abbreviated as PDP in parentheses with pages.

described in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929/1963). In this book, Mikhail Bakhtin analyzes the texts of Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky (1821-1881) on the basis of alternating statuses between author and characters. Bakhtin utilizes this concept, originally musical terminology signifying the harmonic union of more than two independent melodies by the musical form of counterpoint, to analyze the literary text of Dostoevsky.<sup>2)</sup>

Bakhtin defines the concept of 'polyphony' in a literary sense as follows:

*A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels. What unfolds in his works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event.* (PDP 13, Bakhtin's emphasis)

Furthermore, in *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*, Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson advocate that Bakhtin's polyphony has two "closely related criteria: a "dialogic sense of truth and a special position of the author necessary for visualizing and conveying that sense of truth" (234). Such criteria are "two aspects of the polyphonic work's 'form-shaping ideology'" (234), and are not likened to that plot or structure of an aloof author, but a "dialogic sense of truth," boundlessly ebbing toward the unanticipated closing and constant flux of the author's participation in the novel's dialogue; principally by creating characters who embody various aspects of his ideology in "eventness" (251), which enables such a literary dialogization.

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2) Morson and Emerson maintain that Bakhtin uses the musical concept of polyphony to some limited extent such as the idea of an interweaving of independent "melodies," (or voices) multiplicity, dissonance or "unmergedness," and dynamic movement, omitting the necessity of *simultaneous* sounding and (as if following atonal or modern musical sensibilities) and not insisting that polyphonic development move from dissonance to consonance (Morson & Emerson p. 485 Chapter 6, note 3).

Polyphony is a literary device that is markedly different from Heteroglossia. Morson and Emerson differentiate the two concepts as follows:

Also, polyphony is not even roughly synonymous with heteroglossia. The latter term describes the diversity of speech styles in a language, the former has to do with the position of the author in a text. Many literary works are heteroglot, but very few are polyphonic. The two concepts pertain to fundamentally different kinds of phenomena, although the critical practice of conflating Bakhtin's categories has tended to blur the distinction for many readers. (Emerson & Morson 232)

As such polyphony indicates evidence of the author's voice, which is to express his or her own ideology using a protagonist or a character and to readily expose the diverse discourses of such characters therefore losing charisma and becoming a subject or an object in the battle of discourses, while heteroglossia is the writing technique used to convey a diverse set of stylistic devices and usage of a single language for the purpose of political implication, such as satire or parody.

Consequently, the characters in such a literary work are not passive objects controlled according to the author's design like those in traditional novels but active, creative and independent subjects, who share common bearings with the author. That is to say, a 'traditional hero,' characterized as an exodus from the author's oppression and or vicarious conciliation of his or her present discontentment, is to be regarded as an independent subject with a strong sense of self-consciousness, engaging in dialogue with the voice of the author throughout literary proceedings.

The polyphonic novels are characterized by multifarious forms of consciousness and voices that are immune to the authoritative author. According to Bakhtin, the concept of polyphony, which is used in the creation or analysis of a novel, indicates the phenomenon in which such voices or forms of consciousness are sovereign from the author's assertion of precise ideology or conclusion, and "in no way, can a character's discourse be exhausted by the usual functions of characterization and

plot development, nor does it serve as a vehicle for the author's own ideological position" (*PDP* 6-7).

As aforementioned, the polyphonic author, in contrast to the 'monologic author,' who develops his own intention through a character in the novel as his persona, seems to lose his own influence in a literary work. However, as for the caliber of an author in a polyphonic novel, Bakhtin ascertains as follows:

The author of a polyphonic novel is not required to renounce himself or his own consciousness, but he must to an extraordinary extent broaden, deepen and rearrange this consciousness (to be sure, in a specific direction) in order to accommodate the autonomous consciousness of others. This was very difficult and unprecedented project (something Chernyshevsky apparently understood very well when he devised his plan for the "objective novel." But it was essential if the polyphonic nature of life itself was to be artistically recreated. (*PDP* 68)

According to Bakhtin, the author of a polyphonic novel plays a role in the construction and administration of the artistic principles laden within the textual context of the literary work, in the quest of pursuing a dialogic perspective. The author as a subject of literary discourse, postulates a foundation of a complete dialogic perspective, and stirs a tension between the author and characters pursuing the freedom of thought and action. Sequentially, unmerged voices ceaselessly deluge within the composition to yield a prolific quantity of intermingled, ideological languages.

It is above all due to the freedom and independence characters possess, in the very structure of the novel, vis-a-vis the author—or, more accurately, their freedom vis-a-vis the usual externalizing and finalizing authorial definitions. This does not mean, of course, that a character simply falls out of the author's design. No, this independence and freedom of a character is precisely what is incorporated into the author's design. This design, as it were, predestines the character for freedom (a relative freedom, of course), and incorporates him as such into the strict and carefully calculated plan of the whole. (*PDP* 13)

Thus the polyphonic author, as Morson and Emerson expound citing Bakhtin, “neither lacks nor fails to express his ideas and values” (232-33). Bakhtin himself also insists, “The issue here is not an absence of, but *a radical change in, the author’s position*” (*PDP* 67 Bakhtin’s emphasis). However, such radical alteration does not lead to the lack of unity in a novel but to what Bakhtin refers to as “a unity of a higher order” (*PDP* 298).

Another important concept concerning the authorial position in Bakhtin’s polyphonic novels is “surplus.” Bakhtin explains three kinds of surplus, which are “essential,” “information-bearing,” and “addressive” surplus, respectively (Morson & Emerson 241-43). The ‘essential surplus’ delineates the omnipotent point of view, through which the author is omniscient about all the details in the work, “finalizes” a character, and definitively establishes his identity (241). The ‘information-bearing surplus’ is similar to the observer’s point of view, through which the author knows the least information of the character in order to “carry forward the story” (242). Lastly, the ‘addressive surplus,’ which is the most appropriate point of view of the polyphonic author, prohibits the author or character from revealing superfluous information about the other, and “without trying to finalize the other or define him once and for all, uses one’s ‘outsidedness’ and experience to ask the right sort of questions.”

### III. Polyphony in “A Mother”

R. B. Kershner states, “‘A Mother’ is by no means the subtlest of *Dubliners* stories, but in the dialogical relationship between narrator and protagonist it is one of the most interesting” (124). He compares Mrs Kearney, the heroine of this story with Mrs Mooney, that of “The Boarding House,” both of whom “are concerned with maintaining power in the face of opposition” (124), analyzing the reasons of their success and failure.

Mrs. Mooney gains the economic advantage of marrying off her daughter by invoking the rhetoric of bourgeois morality, while Mrs. Kearney attempts to invoke the rhetoric of contrasts in order to maintain a social advantage for her daughter, that of association with a leading bourgeois "cultural" group. That Mrs. Mooney succeeds while Mrs. Kearney fails can be ascribed to the fact that Mrs. Mooney invokes a "higher" social rhetoric to disguise a "lower" motivation, while Mrs. Kearney is attempting the reverse. By reducing the concert to a matter of labor and remuneration, Mrs. Kearney embarrassingly demystifies this massively overdetermined cultural event. (Kershner 124)

Superficially, this is a story concerning "a petty squabble between part-time entertainers," and "one of the stories that epitomizes the domineering and scheming motherhood" (Peake 4) centering on a stubborn, self-willed matriarch who attempts to live vicariously through her timid daughter. It is also regarded as "the most pathetic example of a woman trying to break into a male-dominated power structure" (Henke 40). In terms of the polyphonic imagination, however, this story may be regarded as a journal of battle between an individual woman and a male-centered society.

Florence L. Walzl introduces the two objectives of the story as follows:

"A Mother" has two aims. Its prime purpose, since this story was part of the triad on public life, was to give a picture of the fine arts in Dublin. Joyce chose music as the medium, both because it was dominant in Irish culture and because he had musical ambitions himself at this period. His second aim was to show the effect of Irish provinciality, ignorance, and parsimony on the career of a young would-be-artist. In writing this part of the story, Joyce drew a memorable portrait of the dominant mother, a well-recognized Irish family type. (184)

Another intention of Joyce as an author of this story is to present his judgement on the state of the Art in Dublin by describing a process of a grand concert's program and the performances, which is based on his own experience in "'the grand concert' on August 27, 1904" (Walzl 185). In the concert sponsored by a

nationalistic organization, the Irish Industrial Exhibition, which is an event instituted to spread propaganda and raise funds for their cause, Joyce participated as a singer, but could not fulfill his musical duties because the original accompanist left early and the substitute was “so poor that he could not sing the song scheduled on the program and had to take over the piano himself ” (Walzl 186).

The author’s personal experiences became “the nub of his plot for ‘A Mother’” (Walzl 186), and in this story, the authorial voice intending to criticize the asinine management capabilities of the concert organizer is encumbered with voices of the egocentric mother, the irresponsible members of the committee, and the artists rebuking one another for the failure of the concert.

According to Walzl, Joyce “attributed the failures, clearly and vividly, to the incompetency of three members of the *Eire Abu* committee in charge of the concert” (186), respectively named Hoppy Holohan with “a game leg” (*D* 136), Mr Fitzpatrick, the secretary of the society with “a vacant face” (*D* 139), and Miss Beirne, a woman with “twisted features” (*D* 142). The physical defects of the committee members charged with the undertaking of concert proceedings appear to be associated with its general deficiency.

Examining the multiple polyphonic battles of the confrontational voices riddled within the text, the reader becomes acquainted with the defiant voice of a decisive mother, and those of the author, whose personal experience motivates him to write this story, and of the organizers of the concert, including societal attitudes towards women. The ubiquity of these roles incarnates Joyce as an author who attempts to reveal the general state of the cultural world of Dublin.

As for Mrs Kearney, originally a daughter of the Devlin family with a good education and some musical talent, she was married to Mr Kearney, a bootmaker to “silence” (*D* 137) her friends’ gossip about her deferred marriage while she was remaining “chilly and aloof when young” (Henke 40), repressing her “romantic desires by eating a great deal of Turkish Delight in secret” (*D* 136-37). Even though her marriage was not as satisfactory as she had expected, she was much loved by her husband, who was “much older than she” (*D* 137), and was “a good



wife to him" (D 137).

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. She was glad that he had suggested coming with her. (D 141)

In some respects, Mrs Kearney is a frustrated romantic, who "had to settle for a dull marriage to a sober, elderly bootmaker" (Walzl 184). She failed to achieve a brilliant life as a wife and musician, and futile were her aspirations to secure a musical career for her daughter, Kathleen. Regardless, despite her deteriorated reputation as "a domineering and scheming motherhood" (Peake 4), and one of the "self-seeking, materialistic mothers looking to exploit the commercial potential of their daughters" (Brown 94), it seems compelling to deduce that she is not only a good wife but also a good mother, who ardently endeavors to take advantage of an opportunity for her daughter to rise in the world.

Although "Hoppy Holohan, the assistant secretary, hops about Dublin on his game leg for a month, arguing and making notes but never reaching a decision" (Walzl 186), Mrs Kearney is the very person "who arranged everything" (D 136).

She had a tact. She knew what *artistes* should go into capitals and what *artistes* should go into small type. She knew that the first tenor would not like to come on after Mr Meade's comic turn. To keep the audience continually diverted she slipped the doubtful items in between the old favourites. (D 138)

"Everything that was to be done was done" (D 139) owing to her active and decisive way of thought and behavior. In fact she has done everything to prepare the concert herself including the decoration of her daughter's dress, purchase of some tickets for her friends, advertisement of the concert, and, more than anything else, making a contract for Kathleen's performance. She sends out little boys into the principle streets of Dublin with bundles of handbills to advertise the concert,

and, throughout the story, she claims for the validity of the fulfillment of the contract: “But, of course, that doesn’t alter the contract, she said. The contract was for four concerts” (*D* 140).

What makes her most indignant is the biased demeanor of the misanthrope Dublin society, which, as she theorized, “wouldn’t have dared to have treated her like that if she had been a man,” and what she tirelessly advocates is to “see that her daughter got her rights” and that “she wouldn’t be fooled” (*D* 148). Despite widespread adverse critique of her behavior inside and outside of social contexts, she appears to be a great mother, campaigning for her daughter’s civil liberties, as well as her own rights.

Mr Holohan demonstrates great incompetency in numerous aspects. However, he appears to do his best to help Mrs Kearney and maintain his obligations, even with his limitations as an assistant secretary with no practical right to decide anything but to follow the rule of the amorphous committee.

He said that the Committee had made a mistake in arranging for four concerts: four was too many.

—And the *artistes!* said Mrs Kearney. Of course they are doing their best, but really they are no good.

Mr Holohan admitted that the *artistes* were no good but the Committee, he said, had decided to let the first three concerts go as they pleased and reserve all the talent for Saturday night. (*D* 140)

In fact, “there is no indication in the story that the committee has ever met in a full body,” and it solely represents “the value of masculinity in the same vague way as the existence of the General Post Office” (Leonard 267), whose abstractness Mrs Kearney associates with her husband’s abstract value as a male (*D* 141).

Mr Fitzpatrick is in charge of the payment for the performers, so in actuality “it wasn’t [Holohan’s] business” (*D* 144). It seems, however, that he explained Mrs Kearney’s request to Mr Fitzpatrick so emphatically that he later stormed into the dressing room holding “a few bank notes in his hand,” and “counted out four into

Mrs Kearney's hand and said she would get the other half at the interval" (*D* 147). So his behavior here seems to indicate that he is doing his best both as a broker and as one of the organizers.

Mrs Kearney complains that the amount is still lacking "four shillings" (*D* 147), which means that she won't let her daughter continue to play the piano any more. Then Kathleen, who "looked down, moving the point of her new shoe" (*D* 146) indifferently before, "gathered in her skirt" (*D* 147), called Mr Bell, the second tenor, who was "shaking like an aspen" (*D* 147), and took him to the stage.

Kathleen's behavior seems to be derived from a kind of partial satisfaction after glimpsing some monetary retribution for her work. She also clearly demonstrates her will to honor the claims of the audience who want the show to continue. The reader is able to be privy to an inaudible voice of Kathleen, sparked by her behavior to rebel against her mother's will. Interestingly, even though Joyce ruined his performance due to the poor play of his accompanist in a similar situation of his own accord, the performance of Mr Bell, who appears to be his surrogate in this story, is described as "very successful" (*D* 147).

After such turbulences, Mr Holohan and Mr Fitzpatrick promise "that the other four guineas would be paid after the Committee meeting on the following Tuesday and that, in case her daughter did not play for the second part, the Committee would consider the contract broken and would pay nothing" (*D* 148).

The voices of the two men appear to echo the atmosphere of a male-centered society, which oppresses the voice of a woman claiming her own rights, and insists that she be reticent and obedient to the order of 'their' society. The dressing room as an arena of clamoring voices seems to symbolize the male-centered city of Dublin, in which Mrs Kearney is surrounded not only by an indifferent and egocentric male such as the baritone, who keeps his silence satiated with his quittance, but also by a more threatening entity like Mr O' Madden Burke, who is to "write the notice" instead of a reporter (*D* 145). The latter refutes the performance as "the most scandalous exhibition he had ever witnessed," and says "Miss Kathleen Kearney's musical career was ended in Dublin after that" (*D* 147).

After that Mrs Kearney's conduct was condemned on all hands: everyone approved of what the Committee had done. She stood at the door, haggard with rage, arguing with her husband and daughter, gesticulating with them. She waited until it was time for the second part to begin in the hope that the secretaries would approach her. But Mrs Healy had kindly consented to play one or two accompaniments Mrs Kearney had to stand aside to allow the baritone and his accompanist to pass up to the platform. She stood still for an instant like an angry stone image and, when the first notes of the song struck her ear, she caught up her daughter's cloak and said to her husband:

–Get a cab!

–That's a nice lady! He said. Oh, she's a nice lady!

–You did the proper thing, Holohan, said Mr O' Madden Burke, poised upon his umbrella in approval. (*D* 149)

After seeking sympathies for her own situation, Mrs Kearney decides to exit the scene with her family leaving the reproachful voices of the male-centered society behind. The voice of Mrs Kearney is one that is deflated and defeated by the backwash of Dublin society in general, and then echoes the temperament of an authorial voice: “he thought she had not been well treated” (*D* 148).

Here the voice advocating the position of Mrs Kearney is that of the second tenor, “a fair-haired little man who competed every year for prizes at the *Feis Ceoil*” and “had been awarded a bronze medal” (*D* 142) on his fourth trial. This man's voice can be allegorized to that of Joyce because, “In May 1904 Joyce had won the bronze medal singing in the annual *Feis Ceoil*, an annual music festival, and he was eager to make some money” (Walzl 184).

Even though Joyce himself ruined his performance in a real concert due to the implosion of the accompanist, as a polyphonic author, he not only attempts to glamorize his failure but also plunges into dialogues as one of the characters, and seems to attribute his failure not solely to the accompanist alone, but the atmosphere of the male-centered society. The paralytic aspects of Dublin's cultural society are very cleverly orchestrated by polyphony in this story, reverberated in the plethora of incommensurable voices.

"A Mother" is therefore a story about an embittered mother who "has managed to displace her own secret romantic aspirations onto the lives of her docile daughter making use of nascent Celtic Revival" (Henke 41). It is also a story about "women who dare to step out of line and transgress sex-stereotyped codes of behavior, and are inevitably doomed to suffer harsh consequences for challenging an obdurate patriarchy" (Henke 41). It is also a detailed documentation of largely paralyzed cultural aspects of Dublin; an impetuous battlefield of voices elaborately composed by a polyphonic author, in which a multitude of voices from Dublin's cultural society, including that of the author, are transcribed.

#### IV. Conclusion

In his article, "Polyphony in *Ulysses*" Jong-il Yi, with regards to Joyce's later works, states that recent criticism of Joyce has the inclination "to put the polytropic play in language and technique before the realistic elements of the narrative" in order "to give priority to heterogeneity over homogeneity" (Yi 122). It seems evident that Joyce's later works such as *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* are abundant with diverse voices to personify the heterogeneity of the modern world.

Nevertheless, plenty of stories in *Dubliners*, including "A Mother," are inoculated with diverse voices bent upon a strong desire to enforce their values and efficacies. Though Joyce maintains that his intention was "to write a chapter of the moral history" of Ireland in the style of "scrupulous meanness" (SL 83), the polyphonic reading of this story, based on Bakhtin's supposition, enables the reader to view this story as a combat zone of voices in which the author functions as a literary Maestro, creating diverse dialogues to convey great discourse in the city of Dublin.

Bakhtin's polyphony emphasizes heterogeneity rather than homogeneity, to impart variegation of the modern style, and focuses on the changes of the author's position of omnipotence to that of a character in the story, thereby exhibiting 'a

whole' composition of competing voices. Joyce as an author of this story, despite his apparent intention, has a strong presence amongst the voices of the characters, allowing them to communicate and thereby illustrate a collective 'battle field of utterances,' ultimately using personal experience as an impetus for the materialization of interlocution.

Joyce reveals the palsied, cultural circumstances of Dublin via the integration of miscellaneous voices throughout the contextual schema of the story. Thus superficially it is a story of a pompous mother with a strong impulse to facilitate her daughter's transcendence in the world and "the most pathetic example of a woman trying to break into a male-dominated power structure" (Henke 40).

It is also a story of a thwarted artist who, at the mercy of her mother's inundated desires may wreck her career, but valiantly proceeds with the notion of what she believes is right; and a singer who may ruin his career due to a slipshod accompanist. Again it is a story of a national movement organization that extirpated the promotion of their propaganda due to the exigent appeals of a mother claiming that the payment, or lack thereof, was repugnant in accordance to the contract and reducing a special cultural event of a grand concert to "a matter of labor and remuneration" (Kershner 124). And by means of all those conflicting voices the author's leer of his 'home country,' is clearly reflected in the characters presented throughout the story.

The immutable fluctuation of opposing voices in this story may sound appropriate in one aspect and inappropriate in the other; none of the parties involved being right or wrong. In brief, the story of "A Mother," dispenses a glimpse of the paralytic state of Dublin's cultural commonwealth through a profusion of conflicting voices, and may be considered one of the stories decipherable in Bakhtinian polyphony, whose author, functioning as one of the voices of the story's ensemble, seems to establish "a unity as a higher order" (*PDP* 298).

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**Abstract**

## Reading Polyphony in “A Mother”

Cheol-soo Kim

This paper aims to re-read “A Mother,” one of the short stories in James Joyce’s *Dubliners*, with reference to Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of ‘polyphony,’ and to trace the way in which Joyce, as a polyphonic author, orchestrates the discourses disclosing a paralysis of the cultural society of Dublin.

Bakhtin’s concept of ‘polyphony’ punctuates the presence of the author’s voice in the feuding discourses within the text. Such polyphonic novels are characterized by diverse forms of cognizance and voices unfettered by an authoritative writer. Instead of governing the story by personal impulsion, the polyphonic author functions as an organizer of “a unity as a higher order.”

The story of “A Mother” is subsumed of voices vindicating individualized ideals and validities. Such examples include the mother, regarded as “the most pathetic example of a woman trying to break into a male-dominated power structure,” a national movement organization that failed in its crusade to promote propaganda due to a peremptory demand of the egocentric mother, and an author disparaging the affairs in his ‘home country.’ As an amalgamate web of conflicting voices, neither right nor wrong, this story may be prized as an archetype of Bakhtinian polyphony, whose author, functioning as a single voice, advocates unity as a higher order.

■ **Key words** : Joyce, *Dubliners*, “A Mother,” Bakhtin, polyphony, polyphonic author, unity as a higher order

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