

Filling the Gaps: Reading “Clay” Again

Hee-Whan Yun

I

What is a reading? Is it a search for a text’s “ultimate” meaning? If such a thing as “the one true” meaning of an author exists, readers might determine his intention. On the contrary, a text is an autonomous entity, independent of the author’s intention, of a polysemantic nature. The intrinsic plurality of the meaning of a text naturally allows various interpretations different from one another. In other words, there are no determinate meanings and the stability of a text is an illusion (Fish 529). Indeed, by reading, a text is realized. The reader’s interpretation enables text to “take on life when it is realized” (Iser 274).

For a reading process, we need a reader and text. Defining “text” so broadly, i. e. anything written in language, leads us to restrict ourselves to our current concern, literary texts. Literature, however, is not the private world of an individual author, so much as a semiotic system based on conventions to “convert linguistic sequences into literary structures and meaning” (Culler 114). Readers must be equipped with “literary competence,” (Culler 113-30) just as we need “linguistic

competence” to communicate in a given language. Literary competence, so to speak, is an internalized “grammar” or set of conventions. Readers of literary text, therefore, should be “informed readers” or members of an “interpretive community” as Fish calls them (Fish 529). Reading and interpretation may occur in solitude, but are highly social and inseparable from interpersonal and institutional conventions. With no “shared basis of agreement” on interpretation, a total debilitating relativism is inevitable (Fish 531).

Tracing the plot line of “Clay” satisfies the first-time reader, who learns what sort of character Maria is, and grows even more delighted to match title of the short-story “with a soft wet substance” (*D* 101). Reading literature, however, is not plot-summary. Rereading “Clay,” however, leaves the impression one knows less and less. Just what is Maria’s narrative about? Why do we feel lost? Like so many Modernist texts, Joyce’s works often resist or don’t assist interpretation. They subvert: a statement in his text tends to connote or imply far beyond what it literally means. Numerous narrative gaps, ellipses, absences, omissions, silences interrupt. Bašić says, “*Dubliners* simultaneously invites and undermines categorization and sense making” (Bašić 351). Thus, reading “Clay” is challenging, despite its apparent transparency and simple structure. Yes, Maria is a woman, cheerful, affable, self-confident but with limited horizons. If we label her a “paralyzed” character like so many thoughtless, dependent, immoral, asocial *Dubliners* encountered in the collection, so what? Is her case not just one more deplorable “frustration,” strengthening the collection’s overall negative impression? Yes, we can be satisfied with such a schematic reading of Maria’s narrative, and mark her as one of those characters of general malaise, emotional, moral and volitional, etc., and then close the book. An “informed” reader, however, keeps returning to the text, and exerts his imagination to delve into what is unsaid in the text, the unwritten narrative. Ironically, such a textual indeterminacy stimulates the reader’s imagination, and his real interpretive task is recovering the “unwritten” text. If he draws a consistent, meaningful whole from the text, his interpretation will prove creative and the text, “inexhaustible.”

Countless interpretations of "Clay" exist. For this latest to be creative, or even aesthetically pleasing, it must reach beyond the hitherto accumulated readings. To find fresh meaning, this paper takes narrative indeterminacy as a starting point and seeks to fill narrative gaps, and connect the written and unwritten parts. Both a creative and an informed imagination is called for: creative, because uncovering the "unwritten" text needs imagination; informed, because this imaginative act must be controlled by literary convention and the written text. This highlights the reader's, rather than the author's, role as text interpreter or the ultimate determiner of meaning. Also, this interpretation will pay particular attention to irony because a terrible chasm lurks between what is narrated and what is meant. Once we reread "Clay" from an ironic perspective, we are taken aback by so many cases of ironic distance between Maria and other characters, as well as between the narrator and his narration. Ironic perceptiveness proves functional because Maria is of poor intelligence and even poorer receptiveness, and the narrator is, we find, unreliable. Finally, and above all, I will point out the philosophical concept of "contingency," the overriding theme for analysis because the concept, irrespective of human intentions, frustrates, embarrasses, and sometimes even exasperates the characters.

II

Ostensibly, "Clay" is a short-story about Maria. Her image as a whole character accretes and changes as new facts are revealed. That is our simple reading process. The reader encounters so many abrupt happenings as the narrative unfolds, that he feels surprised, even frustrated, and he must revise again and again his impression of Maria. An innocent reader accepts at face-value what the narrator says about Maria. He believes all the praises heaped on her: "Maria, you are a veritable peace-maker" (*D* 95). The reader buys the narrator's report that "[e]veryone was so fond of her" (*D* 95). The narrative surface looks transparent and the narrator, comprehensible. The perceptive reader, however, starts to question the narrator's

reliability and sense the irony between what is said and meant. He knows too well that real life scarcely offers a warm, cozy, polished kitchen such as Maria feels so proud of. The creative reader discerns the limited, rather than omniscient, perspective reporting Maria. His narration is disoriented, even misleading at times. The narrator's unreliability escalates when he introduces Maria in a language befitting her vocabulary and speech. The narrator "uses Maria's own presumed language to emphasize her willful evasion of reality" (Williams 449). With such a narrative situation, the reader should be wary of his interpretation, deciding what to believe and what to suspect.

The world around Maria looks seamless and friendly: women working *in Dublin by Lamplight* like Maria, a gentleman on tram smiles at her, Joe Donnelly is nice to her, and his kids welcome her and her presents. Maria feels life around her goes swimmingly because she is simple-minded and unable to penetrate her illusions. She constructs her narrow, private world of what others say, never doubting their utterances. Her self-image is composed of others' words. She repeats and strengthens the falsehood with such unrealistic vocabulary as "nice," "easy," "merry," "very," etc. In Maria's limited view, everything on Halloween is problem-free if she believes all troubles will be made right. Such an attitude can be an "ideological veiling of reality" (Williams 451). A sensitive reader, however, repeatedly detects the characters' emotional balance breaking and recovering throughout the evening. We feel the emotional undercurrent of the characters is precarious.

Reflecting Maria's truncated worldview, "Clay" is written in a childlike style to "repress her potentially unpleasant perceptions or experiences" (Werner 88). Hence Maria's pitiful self-deception. She knows not who she is, nor can she objectively recognize her woeful, social as well as economic, situation. Maria has neither money nor shelter nor family. She has in her purse "two half crowns and some coppers" (*D* 96), enough for tram fare and cakes for the Donnellys. That's all she has that evening but she consoles herself, saying "how much better it was to be independent and to have your own money in your pocket" (*D* 98). We hear, she

used to work as a baby-sitter for Joe and Alphy. After the brothers' breakup, Maria, with no place to go, gains a position in a correctional laundry or "laundered whorehouse" (Norris 209) run by Protestants. Working with ex-prostitutes, Maria's social status is among the lowest in Dublin. Again, Maria, a Catholic employed by Protestants, overpraises, saying that "[Protestants] were very nice people to live with" (*D* 96). She also has no family to live with. Maria is a lonely, old, impoverished, laborer. However, she never betrays such sentiments. That is the "unwritten" narrative. If she doesn't feel deeply lonesome, why does she long for the reunion with the Donnellys with such expectation? According to the text, "[s]he hoped they have a nice evening" (*D* 98). Regarding her life in an institution, Maria rationalizes by recalling her rejection of Joe's invitation to live with him. She comforts herself, adding "Joe was a good fellow" (*D* 96). The Donnellys may have nice personalities but she never suspects that they might find her an outsider, a nuisance. In fact, she unconsciously disturbs the family that evening.

Look at how contingencies in the narrative betray Maria's limited, malformed world-view as well as her misunderstandings. First, consider the encounter on the tram. Maria feels touched by an elderly man who, unlike inconsiderate young men, makes room for her. She starts talking with him. Then she writes a fairy-tale version, imagining the man as both a gentleman and colonel. Showing him mock-consent with nods and hems, she interprets his behavior as kindness. She even bows, in parting. Out of the tram, she concludes "how easy it was to know a gentleman" (*D* 99). We immediately recognize Maria's favor toward the elderly man is one-sided because he is drunk, as the narrator points out. The narrator mocks, "he has taken a drop," (*D* 99) in order to subtly reflect the drinker's "evasion of reality" (Williams 449). Later on, Maria finds she left plum cake in the tram and recalls her disorientation talking with the old man. Like Eveline dating Frank, Maria was "pleasantly confused" (*D* 32).

Maria, remembering how confused the gentleman with the greyish moustache has 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)

That moment, Maria's emotional equilibrium breaks and she upsets with herself. Her self-complacency is shattered because the nice surprise she had planned as well as her precious money are all gone. At this moment, the even flow of the narrative halts and readers are forced to look back and revise whatever image was forming about Maria. She blames herself for her foolishness. Is Maria really to blame? Yes, Maria's enchantment with the old man distracted her into leaving her "surprises" behind in the tram. She's partly responsible for what happened. Maria, however, doesn't recognize that such an absent-minded moment can happen to any one. Otherwise, what's the purpose of "Lost & Found" in the subway? A woman of limited intelligence cannot realize that an unknowable, uncontrollable order of chance, or "contingency" as philosophers call it, is part of life. Richard Rorty, who examines his pragmatic theory of "contingency" in language, selfhood and community, proposes we "recognize" contingency in order to get past it.

Faced with the nonhuman, the nonlinguistic, we no longer have an ability to overcome contingency and pain by appropriation and transformation, but only the ability to *recognize* contingency and pain. The final victory of poetry in its ancient quarrel with philosophy . . . would consist in our becoming reconciled to the thought that this is the only sort of power over the world which we can hope to have. (Rorty 40, his emphasis)

Maria planned to take the tram and meticulously divides one hour into three periods: twenty minutes each from Ballsbridge to Pillar, from Pillar to Drumcondra, plus twenty for shopping. But Maria never expected, as happens to us all, that an old drunk would befriend and charm her with inebriated platter.

Second, events that Maria neither expects nor understands continue that evening. Despite Maria's compliment about Joe's "nice" personality, he becomes temperamental and abruptly takes offence by mid-evening, and bursts into tears in

the end. Maria fails to see through Joe's double personality. When Joe explains and laughs away what happened in his office, Maria, again, neither comprehends nor laughs. He even mocks his "bossy" manager. Joe nevertheless consoles Maria, who laments the missing plum cake. Finally, Maria's emotional turbulence has presumably ebbed and peace is restored in the parlor, with singing and dancing to Mrs. Donnelly's piano. When no one finds a nutcracker, Joe, "nearly getting cross over it," abruptly cries out for Maria's sake. (Note here the nuts "handed round" by neighborhood girls.) Maria, again, feels upset. She wants no nuts. She wants solitude. But Joe insists she have a stout instead. Superficially, his behaviour looks kind toward his childhood baby-sitter. Maria, however, feels uncomfortable with his excessive generosity. Worse, she can't understand why she should be the object of annoyance and concern. The reader wonders if Maria really is the welcomed guest she naïvely imagines. When everybody welcomes her, with "*O, here's Maria!*" (D 99) ironic exaggeration seems to hide their true feelings.

This interpretation fits. Soon afterwards, Joe curses his blood brother he broke up with long before. Inadvertently, with good intentions, Maria refers to Alphy. This inflames Joe who pours oaths on him: "God might strike him stone dead if ever he spoke a word to his brother again" (D 100). Whether Joe's anger stems from his deep-rooted brotherly feud or the simple fact that it is mentioned on All Saints' Eve is hard to tell. Furthermore, does the fact that it was brought up by none other than Maria irritate him? If so, his quick temper that evening is understandable. Maria is arguably related somehow to enmity between the brothers. This is also "unwritten" text, the narrative gap, so to speak. The reader's imaginative interpretation to fill the gap, however, must be controlled by the "written" text. Otherwise, the reading process, as Iser warns, may be inconsistent and subjective.

Thus begins a whole dynamic process: the written text imposes on its unwritten implications in order to prevent these from becoming too blurred and hazy, but at the same time these implications, worked out by the reader's imagination, set the given situation against the background which endows it with far greater

significance than it might have seemed to possess on its own. (Iser 276)

Joe may feel emotional *catharsis* in pouring out vengeful feelings toward Alphy whom he disowns as his brother. But Maria is again trapped in a contingent situation, and knows not what else to do but apologize for mentioning the matter.

Maria's mention of "the unspeakable" in the family and Joe's lost temper are highly contingent. This, however, does not betray the fictional probability. The event was expected somehow. Preparing for the outing, Maria takes out a purse, a present by Joe from the brothers' trip together to Belfast. She likes this affectionate item. On the tram, Maria's consciousness is harrowed by the thought that the Donnelly brothers are not on speaking terms. She even worries about the ever widening breach between them, the best of friends when young. Knowing she cannot help, she suspends her worries with the words, "Such was life" (*D* 98). She cannot go farther. That Maria mentions Alphy in the middle of the night shows she thought about the uncomfortable issue all evening because the "break-up" is still painful event in her memory (Ingersoll 74). We do not know exactly what has caused the Donnelly brothers' break-up. We just know the brothers landed her a work-and-board position *after* their falling out. Arguably they could stay no longer with Maria. Hearing Joe say "Mamma is mamma but Maria is my proper mother" (*D* 96), we surmise she is more than a baby-sitter. Granting Joe's confession is no more than a causal utterance to please Maria, Joe's sentimental attachment to his former nanny irritates Mrs. Donnelly (Ingersoll 81). Strangely enough, Joe and Alphy's blood mother goes unmentioned. She is an absent signifier in "Clay," a story about Maria, the "maternal surrogate," so to speak (Henke 33). Maria cares so much for the Donnelly brothers we suspect if she may still play their mother unconsciously. Maria perfectly fits the role of their mother that she seemingly feels perfectly at home with the Donnellys. She never suspects that "she has become *something like* a family member, without actually being one" (Ingersoll 73), which somehow relates to the still unresolved break-up. The surrogate-mother, however, brings emotional trouble to Joe. Unawares she "rub[s] him the wrong way" (*D* 100).

Advancing our argument, we hazard to wonder if Maria is the very agent who caused their break-up. Leonard also casts doubts by supposing "the breakup of the home was caused by [Joe's] rivalry with Alphy for Maria's recognition" (Leonard 198). But we should leave it there at the most extreme scenario imaginable. One more step, and our interpretation goes out of the control, the range of the "written" text. Then our interpretation risks becoming solipsistic or relative, as Fish warns (Fish 531).

The third contingency relates to the blind-folding game. Just before, we remember, the narrative mood was tense through Maria's reference to Alphy. Joe's exasperation was such that "there was nearly being a row on the head of it" (*D* 100). However, Joe controls his anger, as he remarks that it's such a night. On the surface, the festive mood reigns again, the narrator reports. Maria, unperturbed, again fails to discern the room's uncomfortable undercurrent. The renewed mirth is so brittle, however, it is soon broken again, due to Maria. But for the two next-door girls, the evening would have been joyful, sharing jokes and laughter. The two neighborhood girls, strange intruders, prove contingent characters messing up the Halloween game. They abruptly break the festivities.

They led her up to the table amid laughing and joking and she put her hand out in the air as she was told to do. She moved her hand about here and there in the air and descended on one of the saucers. She felt a soft wet substance with her fingers and was surprised to find that nobody spoke or took off her bandage. There was a pause for a few seconds; and then a great deal of scuffling and whispering. Somebody said something about the garden, and at last Mrs. Donnelly said something very cross to one of the next-door girls and told her to throw it out at once; that was no play. Maria understood that it was wrong that time and so she had to do it over again; and this time she got the prayer-book. (*D* 101)

The significance of the parlor game lies neither in what Maria picks up nor in how it relates to her: it's just a game. I would argue the game implies Maria's blinded existence. She is led to the table and sticks out her hands. She makes such a gesture

before she can pick up anything. Maria is always fumbling about herself. Time and again, she touches just the surface and never fathoms the depths within. She never comprehends the true complexity of people and conditions around her. Maria works for a Protestant institution, blithely ignorant of the conflicts between Ireland's two major denominations. She fails to grasp stories about Joe's job nor does she realize the drunken state of the man she chats with on the tram. She knows not what others say about her, nor who she herself is.

What causes Maria's deficient awareness? First, she lacks the wits, the intelligence to scrutinize and perceive her own life. Second, she doesn't know herself. Yes, she has self-reflective moments like when she confronts herself in the mirror. But she sees not a dreary, old, penniless, lonely, working-woman. Rather, she conjures up "a nice, tidy little body" with "quaint affection" (D 97). This describes not her aging body but what she imagines (Leonard 189-90). When she prepares for Sunday mass, she pictures herself as a young girl. Her self-deception is frequently shattered. Third, she avoids harsh reality. When she was sitting on the tram "with her toes barely touching the floor" (D 98), for example, she avoids touching the solid ground. She creates a microcosm by inflating the value of all facts of her life: polished kitchenware, cake-cutting skill, plants-growing in the conservatory, and a few coins in her purse ("*A present from Belfast*") etc. Fourth, those around her never level with her. They wouldn't allow Maria her own voice. Yes, Maria makes a judgement (i.e. "how easy it was to know a gentleman" [D 99]) or seems self-aware (i.e. "Maria understood that it was wrong this time" [D 101]) but her judgement is often wrong and her understanding, her pretension. She assumes she understands, not through her own reasoning but by the faulty information, filtered through others. During the game, for instance, Maria, blind-folded, vaguely understands *something's* wrong, hearing *somebody* mention the garden and Mrs. Donnelly cross with the girls. The clues Maria receives are indirect and euphemistic, insulating both Maria and naïve readers from the truth. Maria's stubborn resistance to reality or facing painful truths intensify the uncertainties of the narrative.

During the fortune-telling game, meant for kids not adults, Maria is surprised by another contingency. Instead of chatting or joking about her pick-up, everybody whispers and scuffles about. Maria again confronts “the unspeakable” and her shock arrests the narrative flow: “[t]here was a pause for a few seconds” (*D* 101). The suspense is terrible, the sudden silence in the parlor is unfathomable. The unknown space Maria subsists in is dark. She cannot see why Mrs. Donnelly is so angry with the girls for playing a game. Annotations conclude that “clay” signifies death and it was usually omitted from “the genteel Victorian version of the game” (Gifford 77). But Maria doesn’t identify “a soft wet substance” as foreboding of her death before the year is out. On the contrary, her death could be “a death that has set in a long time ago” (Schneider 408-409). On her second try, Maria obtains the prayer-book. She never explains her reaction to the game. Nor can she discern Mrs. Donnelly’s secret wish to banish her to a convent, as the prayer-book foretells. Maria is ridiculed by the children who offer alternative views of Maria’s situation, a senile spinster. It’s not “just pathetic but comical in the eyes of the children” (Chaudhry-Fryer 322). The Donnellys, among themselves, fuss over the “wrong” game due to Maria. What a contingent situation! Maria is bewildered once again.

The last event that shows Maria’s vulnerability to contingency is when she sings. A devout Christian would presumably sing Catholic hymnals or gospel songs. Yet she sings *I Dreamt that I Dwelt*, an aria from Balfe’s opera. With regard to the lyrics, some readers relate Maria’s Cinderella Complex to an unconscious, unfulfilled desire for marriage. Maria’s repetition of the first verse is an intentional repression of her desire in this interpretation. Some textual instances arguably support such a reading. Yet Maria doesn’t look like a woman preoccupied with marriage. When Maria responded to Lizzie Flemming’s joke on her, saying “she didn’t want any ring or man either” (*D* 97), it may be literally true. The following “disappointed shyness” sparking in her eyes is an observation the narrator shares with the women in the correctional. The reasons Maria repeats the first verse twice may be the fact that the second verse simply repeats the theme of the lyric and there’s no need to sing it. Or perhaps Maria omits the second verse because she

doesn't remember it; and finally, so many and contingent events that night bring her such abrupt surprises, frustration and embarrassment. Her self-complacency is pathetic. Maria doesn't even realize her repetition. She does not, or cannot, fully participate. Her present consciousness is torn between regretful past and an unrealizable future. Again, the people around her, the Donnellys, make a fuss not to let Maria feel her mistake. They want to protect as well as insulate Maria from the "Lebenswelt." So they are responsible for Maria's blindness, and her enclosure in a diminutive but complacent world of her own.

Beneath the smooth narrative surface, deep currents of anger, failure, anxiety and bewilderment flow among the characters. Near Maria, whose fragile world is threatened continually by contingencies, comes Joe, whose emotional tranquility has almost reached breaking point. He almost loses his mind over a missing nutcracker. At Maria's reference to Alphy, he bursts into violent anger and even curses his own brother. He doesn't seem to join in the Halloween game. Not recovered from his emotional turbulence, Joe seemed not in the mood. Instead, Joe, a potential alcoholic, was presumably drinking by himself, asking his wife to "open some more stouts" (*D* 100), and favoring Maria with "a glass of wine" (*D* 101). Recall that Maria, on her way to the Donnelly's, had hoped Joe wouldn't come in drunk" (*D* 96). Quite drunk, however, Joe invites Maria to sing for him. This could be Joe's gesture toward Maria to ask for forgiveness for his uncouthness that evening. When Maria finishes singing, "Joe was very much moved" (*D* 102), the narrator reports, bursting into tears. What sort of tears? Does Joe really appreciate Maria's song? Hardly; Joe's tears may be self-pitying "idle tears" for "the long ago" (*D* 102). Or Joe, feeling compassion for Maria's vulnerability, feels apologetic toward her. Whatever the reason, the reader feels deeply touched by Joe's breakdown. No one but Joe reveals his uncomfortable yet true feelings that night: anger, swearing and tears. Such emotions are so spontaneous they can hardly be repressed. Joe, like Maria, proves another victim of the contingency of the night. Joe's son is called Alphy, named after his own brother he so hates. How sadly ironic must be the relationship between the brothers?

Mrs. Donnelly, with reserved manner, succeeds in hiding her genuine feelings all through the evening. She seems kind and polite to every one including Maria. She thanks Maria and has her kids express thanks for the presents. Mrs. Donnelly comforts confused Maria, reasoning she must have left her plum cake on the tram. She recommends port wine to Maria rather than stout. She even scolds Joe for uttering such a shameful curse on his brother. She reprimands the next-door girls for ridiculing Maria by putting their clay on the saucer. At low points, she brings relief and cheers them all up again. Occasionally, she adds a musical air to the room by playing piano for the children. She seems a perfect wife, mother and hostess, avoiding whatever contingents of the evening by suggesting amazing compromises. Mrs. Donnelly may not be as she appears. She may be a generous lady or one hiding her gut feelings through polished speech and manners. If Maria, contrary to her expectation, is an unwanted guest, Mrs. Donnelly's sophistication is suspect. Kenner, and I as well, doubts Mrs. Donnelly's emotional honesty in saying she "has eased [Maria] into the laundry and one may suspect will soon ease her into a convent" (Kenner 57). Mrs. Donnelly skilfully cloaks her knowledge of Maria's pitiable situation with mock-kindness (Chaudhry-Fryer 322). Did Maria ever appreciate Mrs. Donnelly's kindness? Maria repeats her thanks to Joe for his generosity toward her but never, if ever, to his wife. She never forgets to refer to Joe's wife by any name but "Mrs. Donnelly" (Ingersoll 74). Isn't that telling enough?

III

Thus, I have reread "Clay" as an "informed reader." For my personal interpretation to be significant, it should be creative and go, hopefully, beyond previous readings. Yes, the plot of "Clay" is simple, and its narrative surface transparent. So much has been said about "Clay," there seems no more analysis left. But I doubt that, and that's the point where I entered. Despite its narrative

transparency, “Clay,” I argue, is one of the most opaque stories in *Dubliners*. Taking “Clay” as a “celibacy” story, forming a counterpart with “A Painful Case,” is misleading. Such a misreading is attractive because its heroine is poor, old, and simple-minded, unlike Mr. Duffy who is individualistic, intelligent and fastidious. Maria’s perspective is limited and malformed; her world is personal and tiny. That doesn’t mean “Clay” is a simple, thin-layered story. To prove the rich, complex potential of “Clay” as a narrative, this interpretation employed concepts such as indeterminacy, contingency and the reader’s role.

That “Clay” has such great gaps, unspoken parts and missing items shows its complicated depth as a narrative, and readers are positively invited to interpretation. With “literary competence,” as a member of “interpretive community,” a reader contextualizes “Clay” and rewrites the story in his own way, thus letting “Clay” be for him a work of literary art. A creative reader fills the narrative gaps with imagination, and constructs a new version of “Clay” on his own. For his reading to avoid idiosyncrasy and redundancy, he balances what is said and unsaid in the text because “the reader’s activity of filling gaps is ‘programmed’ by the text itself” (Suleiman & Crosman 25). To fill the textual space left unsaid, the reader should perceive not only what’s happening but subtle mood, ironic perspective, unconscious repression, etc.

To maintain the reader’s creativity, I stressed contingency as “Clay’s” overriding principle. With many abrupt events happening, and items missing (i. e. like tricks played by the author on All Saints’ Eve), contingencies make characters confused, shameful, vindictive, and even angry. Maria annoys the Donnelly’s, ironically, out of good intentions or for her own sake. Again and again, she feels at a loss on the evening. Maria, agitated and exhausted, unawares sings a song twice. She is not actually responsible for the evening. Not recognizing life’s contingencies, Maria feels out of place when her good intention fails. Joe is an even more pitiable victim. Out of the blue, he is pushed into emotional turbulence, from outbursts of anger, pacifying tears caused by Maria’s heedless reference to Alphy and then her acquiescent singing. His emotional state is shaken. He cannot stay

sober, he imbibes stout and wine all evening. He doesn't realize the irony contingent situations bring, either. Mrs. Donnelly tries to make peace between Maria and Joe, comforting the former and criticizing the latter. Mrs. Donnelly copes, never losing her equanimity, and trying whatever she can to make a joyous Halloween. But her polished improvisational behaviour does not guarantee the authenticity of her feelings. We never learn her gut feeling but suspect she may not be as she seems.

Contingency is an unavoidable human condition. Not only fictional characters encounter unexpected chance in their lives. We too are trapped by contingent events we fall victims to. Unrelated to our intention, uncontrolled by our volition, contingencies happen to and captivate us. Then we feel lost. Recognizing this universal condition lets us sympathize with characters in “Clay,” trapped like each of us, by contingencies yet never realizing the existential, philosophical dimensions they pack. Also, we come to understand how vulnerable human emotions are when exposed to such contingencies. We admit that we, like Maria, live blind-folded, not knowing what the next moment will bring. Such is the sad, poignant, ironic lesson that our rereading of “Clay” presents.

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Abstract

Filling the Gaps: Reading “Clay” Again

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The narrative transparency of “Clay” is deceptive because so many uncertainties are embedded that the reader’s interpretation is frequently frustrated. Starting from textual indeterminacy, I try to fill the narrative gaps in “Clay” with attention to irony, contingency and the reader’s role, which I hope makes my reading of “Clay” creative. Most irony in “Clay” happens when the narrator reports about Maria falsely. Irony can also occur when Maria fails to understand or suspect what other characters say about her, or when Maria herself represses her desire detected by the reader. Contingency is a philosophical term employed when we try to describe the unexpected and uncontrollable situation chance brings. With contingency the overriding principle, I analyze abrupt events that happen in “Clay,” which I argue efficiently explains speeches, behaviors, and motivations of such main characters as Maria, Joe and Mrs. Donnelly. Finally, readers, in their interpretive role, should use their imaginations, consistent with the “written” text. Otherwise, a reading can be idiosyncratic or irresponsibly relative.

■ **Key words** : indeterminacy, contingency, irony, interpretation, reader’s role

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