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A Mother's Decisions for her Daughter

Introduction

Within James Joyce's collection of short stories *Dubliners*, the mother daughter relationships shown in "The Boarding House" (Joyce, 56) and "A Mother" (Joyce, 134) are interesting in how similar yet different they are. In both cases, the story is about a mother who is trying to get what is best for her daughter, yet they go about it in such different ways with different results. The reader is given a brief background on the mothers, and it can be assumed that each mother wants their daughter to live a better life than they did, to find the happiness the mothers themselves might not have been able to find themselves. The key questions are whether or not one of these approaches was better than the other given how the story ended for the mothers and their daughters, and if the different approaches themselves were the right ones to take given the circumstances and the culture at that time.

After reading both stories, I thought that while it was honorable and admirable that the mothers wanted what was best for their daughters and were willing to go to various lengths to try and achieve that, both of their decisions could be considered questionable for different reasons. While in "The Boarding House" Mrs. Mooney, the mother of Polly Mooney, did get what she wanted in the end, there is a lot that could have gone wrong especially with how things were in Irish culture, but Mrs. Mooney still did what she thought was best for her daughter, essentially by not acting. Then in "A Mother" with Mrs. Kearney and her daughter Kathleen Kearney, the story

reminds me of a mother that shined as a young woman and settles in the end, not able to find anyone who truly caught her attention, then all her attention goes into trying to make sure her daughter got what she did not. Mrs. Kearney reminds me of a pageant mom, someone who enters her daughter into beauty pageants and relives glory days or gets validation through the wins that her daughter has. This will all be explored further in each section, then compared at the end since I believe that while the mothers had only good intentions in mind, they may not have went about it in the proper or best way.

“The Boarding House”

When it comes to the actions made by Mrs. Mooney that I will be focusing on, it should be noted that Mrs. Mooney had first sent her daughter to be a typist in a corn-factor's, but after a disreputable sheriff's man used to come every other day to the office asking to have a word to his daughter, Mrs. Mooney had brought Polly back to the boarding house. Mrs. Mooney had wanted to get a job for her nineteen year old daughter, but since her father had taken to trying to have a word with Polly there, Mrs. Mooney took her daughter away from that situation to keep her former husband away from Polly. This is an action I approve of. There is no question for me on whether or not that was the right decision, as the man had tried to kill Mrs. Mooney when they were married, and drank away their money. When it comes to the decisions that Mrs. Mooney makes in regards to her daughter, getting Polly away from possible interactions with her father is the one that I fully approve of.

Then Mrs. Mooney brought Polly back to the boarding house and set her to do housework, and it is said that Polly was very lively, and Mrs. Mooney's intention was to give Polly the run of the young men. “Besides, young men like to feel that there is a young woman

not very far away.” (58) This is something that immediately told me there could be trouble, and to a degree this assumption is correct and although it could have ended badly, things worked out the way Mrs. Mooney wanted. There was one young man that Polly seemed close to, and Mrs. Mooney realizes there is something going on between them, and watched the pair of them while keeping to herself and not stopping them. “Polly knew that she was being watched, but still her mother’s persistent silence could not be misunderstood. There had been no open complicity between mother and daughter, no open understanding but, though people in the house began to talk of the affair, still Mrs. Mooney did not intervene.” (58)

Mrs. Mooney essentially allows her daughter to begin a relationship with Mr. Doran, and then uses the fact that they are not married and that it has become somewhat public knowledge to force him to marry Polly. Then it can be assumed that the reason Mrs. Mooney allowed Polly and Mr. Doran to start their relationship in the first place was because to some degree, Mrs. Mooney approved of Mr. Doran as he had a steady job and was a man who had seen something of the world. So in doing nothing to stop the two from engaging in a relationship, Mrs. Mooney set things up where all the cards were in her favor in regards to how it would be resolved. “She was sure she would win. To begin with she had all the weight of social opinion on her side: she was an outraged mother. She had allowed him to live beneath her roof, assuming that he was a man of honour, and he had simply abused her hospitality.” (59)

To me it seems that after bringing Polly back to the boarding house, Mrs. Mooney had decided that she needed to get her daughter married, and one way to do it was to allow a relationship to form between one of the better boarders and her daughter, do nothing to stop it, and then force the marriage. “For her only one reparation could make up for the loss of her

daughter's honour: marriage." (60) As noted by Nathan Halper in his critical essay on "The Boarding House", there are a lot of connections that can be made between this story and the other stories of *Dubliners*, as well as other stories by James Joyce. When comparing Mrs. Mooney to Hephaestus, saying that "It does not matter that he is a husband or lame. Neither is germane to the motif." (80) And that like Hephaestus, Mrs. Mooney "sets a trap: a trap connected with a bed...Hephaestus feels he is 'dishonored', which she nearly pretends to be. 'Wild rage gat hold of him, and he cried terribly', but she counts 'all her cards'." (80) While I am unsure if I should believe Mrs. Mooney was scheming the entire time and planned things from the start, or she just took advantage of how things ended up going, I do believe that Mrs. Mooney did want the best for her daughter, no matter her methods of achieving that.

"A Mother"

When it comes to Mrs. Kearney in "A Mother", she got married out of spite to Mr. Kearney who was an older bookmaker who was sober, thrifty and pious, which tells the reader most of what they need to know about these two characters. Mrs. Kearney was well educated where she learned French and music, and after finishing at the school, her playing and ivory manners were much admired by those who saw her. However, "She sat amid the chilly circle of her accomplishments, waiting for some suitor to brave it and offer her a brilliant life." (134) In the end, she married Mr. Kearney, and their elder daughter Kathleen was later sent to a good convent where she learned French and music like her mother. This is important, because the reader learns what Mrs. Kearney's education was and how it turned out for her right from the start, so when Kathleen starts to follow her mothers path, there is a connection made and the

reader might see how there is a chance Kathleen could end up like her mother in a marriage that might not be a bad marriage, but it isn't necessarily a completely happy one.

Mrs. Kearney wants what is best for her daughters, that is something I do believe and she does a fairly good job in making sure they are doing well and getting opportunities with the help of her husband. However, it is my opinion that Mrs. Kearney is looking to get recognition and appreciation through how well her daughters are doing, that she is using them in order to feel better about how her own life turned out since I do not think it is quite as she expected it to be. "Soon the name of Miss Kathleen Kearney began to be heard often on people's lips. People said that she was very clever at music and a very nice girl and, moreover, that she was a believer in the language movement. Mrs. Kearney was well content at this." (135-136)

Mrs. Kearney got praise before getting married because of how talented and polite she was, and then when that started to fade and she got married, Mrs. Kearney was looking for some other way to get the respect and recognition she believed she deserved. So when her daughter starts to get positive attention, Mrs. Kearney pushes to try and make sure things work out in Kathleen's favor, partly for her daughter, partly for herself. "...and finally a contract was drawn up by which Kathleen was to receive eight guineas for her services as accompanist and the four grand concerts." (136) However the concerts do not go quite as planned or expected and Mrs. Kearney demands at the final show for Kathleen to be paid, and that Kathleen will not be going on without being paid. They are given half of the agreed upon amount with the other half promised for after the intermission, and Kathleen goes on to perform with the first half being a big success. However, the men in charge are not happy with how they were treated and with the behavior of Mrs. Kearney, and talks amongst the others and the artistes.

The baritone was asked what did he think of Mrs. Kearney's conduct...However, he said that Mrs. Kearney might have taken the *artistes* into consideration. The stewards and the secretaries debated hotly as to what should be done when the interval came.

—I agree with Miss Beirne, said Mrs. O'Madden Burke. Pay her nothing. (146)

In the end, Mrs. Kearney demands fair treatment and the money that her daughter was promised, and is denied it by the men running the show, then as Mrs. Kearney verbally lashes out, they condemn her for not being ladylike and more. This is the outcome that I expected the moment Mrs. Kearney began to be more outspoken and demanding towards the men running things, as she is a woman in Ireland when woman were not taken seriously, when they were meant to be pretty and polite people who did what they were told and did not speak their minds. So in the end, Mrs. Kearney wanted what was best for her daughter and was trying to make sure she would be treated fairly, but because of her attitude and actions she is shunned since that is not how a lady is meant to act. Kathleen gets only half of the agreed upon amount, and there is very little chance of her getting further work as a performer due to her mother's behavior, and what is deemed as a lack of respect by the men in charge.

When reading through David Hayman's critical essay on "A Mother", I found myself agreeing with him and also fascinated by his analysis of the story and the connections made with several other stories by Joyce. Hayman says that in the stories "Ivy Day in the Committee Room" and "A Mother" there is a theme of "human intercourse turns on a preoccupation with payment" (123) and that "These characters are self-seekers pretending to a moral position they do not hold, in quest of insignificant and hard-earned rewards." (123) While Hayman makes

several other important points, this is the one that stands out to me the most as it is something that I really agree with. Mrs. Kearney is putting such a focus on making sure her daughter is treated properly, meaning that she is paid for her work as stated in the contract, that most everything else is insignificant to her. At first Mrs. Kearney holds back some of her thoughts on the way she is being treated, but near the end when full payment is essentially denied then Mrs. Kearney loses her control and speaks out in a way that the men in charge did not appreciate. Yes she had good reason to speak out in an effort to make sure her daughter was paid the agreed upon amount for the work she did. Yet the way she went about it and how the payment was Mrs. Kearney's main focus, shows that the money could be clouding her judgment to some degree, which in the end results in Kathleen only being paid half the agreed upon amount and all those there turning against Mrs. Kearney, and not condoning her outspoken behavior.

Comparison

When the two stories are looked at together, both Mrs. Mooney and Mrs. Kearney do try to make decisions that will guarantee a happy ending or good things for their daughters, there might be other motives as well in the case of Mrs. Kearney as I stated, but their daughters future is still a main part of their motivation. Both are mothers that are trying to do what they are able to in a society that is not quite in their favor, in order to get a good life for their daughter or try and give their daughter a shot at the happiness they themselves were not able to fully achieve for different reasons. Yet in both cases, Mrs. Mooney and Mrs. Kearney make decisions that could have ended very badly for them and their daughters, and in the case of Mrs. Kearney, things do not end how she wanted or thought they would. This is partly due to the ego Mrs. Kearney

possesses as a result of her schooling and the power Mrs. Kearney seemed to think her education had given her, and also because of how she allowed that to influence her decisions and actions when communicating with the men of the Society.

While Mrs. Mooney does nothing at first and then steps in and pushes Mr. Doran and Polly in the direction she wanted things to go, Mr. Kearney takes a more involved approach and it backfires. During that time, an outspoken woman was not always considered a good thing, and for a woman, especially an educated one, to speak out and go against men believing that she was acting properly, it was considered very unladylike and improper. Even if there was a contract and Mrs. Kearney was simply trying to have them uphold their end of it to make sure her daughter received the agreed upon compensation for her services, in the eyes of the men and even some other women there, Mrs. Kearney was out of place to do so in the way she did. While I believe Mrs. Kearney had good intentions, she was too focused on money to think clearly how acting in a way that was seen as improper could actually hurt her daughter and take away many of the chances Kathleen might have gotten in the future.

I found it to be interesting that the woman who took the more active and direct approach to getting what she wanted is the one who failed in the end, and the woman who sat back and let things happen before stepping in at the right moment is the one who succeeded. The way I interpreted this, was that Mrs. Mooney used her cunning and her knowledge of social opinion at the time to force the outcome she wanted, which is why she got the desired outcome. Mrs. Mooney acted, as some might say, as a woman should by not trying to directly influence or change things, and allowing things to happen. Then when the time was right, Mrs. Mooney didn't make a big scene or act inappropriately, did not directly publicly challenge anyone,

especially any man. Instead, she calmly controlled the situation and used her knowledge of Mr. Doran and the opinion of society to steer things in the direction she wanted. With this in mind, it means that there is a chance if Mrs. Kearney had acted calmly and not made a scene in public, that she could have gotten what she wanted as well as keeping options open for her daughter after the successful final concert. Instead, her emotions got the better of her and created a scene and a sort of scandal as well, turning public opinion against her.

Conclusion

To close, there is still so much more that could be explored in how Mrs. Mooney and Mrs. Kearney acted leading to the stories outcome, as well as in Joyce's work in general with how rich in detail and meaning it is. As stated by Nathan Halper, "If it is written by Joyce, there should be things to explicate." (72) In regards to a lesson that is taught by the actions and outcomes in "The Boarding House" and "A Mother", my main thought on it is as follows. The woman that will succeed in the end, is that the mother who knows how to use societies rules and opinions in order to steer a situation and those in it towards the ending that she wants. In order to get the desired ending, a woman must know how to use her charm and her cunning as well as the ways of society to turn the tides in her favor.

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