A Mother

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JAMES JOYCE

James Joyce was born in Dublin in 1882, the eldest of ten surviving children. Although his Catholic family lived comfortably for the beginning of Joyce's life, when he was around ten, his father lost his job and began drinking heavily. The Joyce family sank into poverty, moving often. But with his father's connections, Joyce still managed to eventually attend Belvedere College, one of the best Jesuit schools in Dublin. His Catholic education left him torn between his feeling that the Church repressed him and his love for its thinkers, symbols, and tradition of intellectual rigor. Joyce attended University College Dublin, where he studied multiple languages, wrote plays and poetry, and published in Irish literary magazines. After graduation, he moved to Paris to study medicine but soon gave up, occasionally appealing to his family for money to support him despite their poverty. In 1903, he returned home to see his dying mother, but refused her dying wish that he make confession and take communion, a defining event for his novel *Ulysses*. From 1904 on, Joyce reworked details from his own life into *Dubliners*, a collection of short stories, and the novels *A Portrait of the Artist as A Young Man*, *Ulysses*, and *Finnegans Wake*. But his controversial writing about religion and sex meant that he had a difficult time getting his writing published, and since he was an accomplished tenor and played the guitar and the piano, he nearly became a musician instead of an author. Despite his publishing woes and the obscenity charges that his work faced, Joyce had a major impact on the Modernist movement of the early 20th century. Just two years after the publication of *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce died in Germany following a surgery on a perforated ulcer.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"A Mother" takes place at the turn of the 20th century in Dublin. During this time, Irish Nationalism, the push for Ireland to fight back against English colonial rule to attain self-governance and economic independence, was growing in influence. The Irish Nationalist movement included political efforts to rebel against English rule—some of them violent. But it also encompassed the Irish Revival: a renewed interest in the Celtic and Gaelic precolonial cultures of Ireland and their languages, literatures, and music. The Kearneys participate in the Nationalist movement by taking advantage of the Irish Revival's popularity to promote Kathleen's musical career. The fictional *Eire Abu* Society also benefits from the Irish Revival: although it ends up a failure, they promote their concert series as a celebration of Irish culture.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"A Mother" is one of the short stories in James Joyce's collection *Dubliners*. Mr Holohan, the event planner in "A Mother," also briefly appears in another story in *Dubliners*, "Two Gallants." "Two Gallants" explores similar themes: the characters, Lenehan and Corley, each appear to be products of their circumstances and mostly focused on getting money like Mrs Kearney. But while Mrs Kearney is wealthy and tries to take advantage of Mr Holohan at the same time he tries to take advantage of her, Lenehan and Corley end up swindling a woman out of a gold coin. Overall, both stories examine how the classism in Dublin society keeps the city and its people stagnant and focused on being self-serving. James Joyce's best known works include novels *A Portrait of the Artist as A Young Man*, *Ulysses*, and *Finnegans Wake*. Playwright Samuel Beckett drew on his personal familiarity with Joyce and his Modernist style in his existentialist dramas like *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot*. Later, Irish author Frank McCourt cited Joyce as an influence on his memoir *Angela's Ashes*, which deals with social tensions in mid-20th-century Ireland.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** A Mother
- **When Written:** 1905
- **Where Written:** Trieste, Italy; Pola, Croatia; and Zürich, Switzerland
- **When Published:** 1914
- **Literary Period:** Modernist
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** Dublin, Ireland
- **Climax:** Mrs Kearney mocks Mr Holohan
- **Protagonist/Antagonist:** The third-person omniscient narrator most often provides the reader with insight into Mrs Kearney's point of view, making her the protagonist of the story. But by fixating on making sure her daughter receives an eight-guinea payment for her performance at a series of concerts, she gets in her own way to the point that she crosses everyone and ruins her family's reputation, making her the story's antagonist, too.
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Joyce's Musical Career: If James Joyce hadn't found success as an author, he might have been an *artiste* like the concert performers in "A Mother"—the story is likely based on his own experiences singing in festivals and competitions. Joyce was an excellent tenor, played the piano and the guitar, and, like Mr

Bell, the second tenor in "A Mother," he competed at the Feis Ceoil (an Irish competitive classical music festival). Joyce won the first round of competition, but only ended up taking home a bronze medal—again, like Mr Bell—in the main event, likely because his poor eyesight made him bad at sight-singing. He is said to have thrown the medal into the River Liffey since he couldn't sell or trade it for anything. But he kept the positive newspaper reviews of his performance in his pockets until they disintegrated.

PLOT SUMMARY

In Dublin, Ireland, around the turn of the 20th century, Mr Holohan, the assistant secretary of the *Eire Abu* Society, has been trying to get a series of concerts arranged for months. But, ultimately, a woman named Mrs Kearney ends up taking care of nearly everything for him. Mrs Kearney is a wealthy, educated Irishwoman who has always been uniquely stubborn. Rather than marry for love, she married the much older Mr Kearney, a stoic, pious boot manufacturer with a large **brown** beard, for the lavish lifestyle he could give her. Their daughter, Kathleen Kearney, receives a top-notch education like her mother. However, unlike Mrs Kearney, Kathleen has the opportunity to attend the Royal Irish Academy of Music to refine her piano-playing ability. When the Irish Revival (a renaissance of Irish art, music, and culture) becomes popular, Mrs Kearney gets Kathleen involved in the Nationalist movement, and Kathleen gains considerable fame as a pianist in Dublin.

Mr Holohan asks Mrs Kearney if Kathleen would be the accompanist for the four-night concert series his Society will be hosting, and she gives him food and wine and works up a contract with him so that Kathleen will receive **eight guineas** for her performance. From then on, Mrs Kearney takes over, advising Mr Holohan on how to plan the concerts and manage the "**artistes**" that will be performing, all the while keeping him supplied with plenty of wine.

Mrs Kearney spends a considerable amount of time and money getting the concerts ready and preparing Kathleen's dress. But on the night of the first concert, she immediately senses that something is wrong. For all the preparation she did, very few people show up to the first concert. When she meets the secretary of the Society, Mr Fitzpatrick, a man with a brown hat and a "flat" Dublin accent, he doesn't seem too disappointed, and his casual approach to the concert series irritates her. Mr Holohan admits that the Committee made a mistake in planning four concerts since four was apparently too many, and they had decided to just save all the best talent for the last concert.

The next concert is better attended, but Mrs Kearney can tell that the rowdy audience is mostly made up of people admitted for free. Mr Fitzpatrick talks loudly throughout the performances and, over the course of the evening, Mrs Kearney learns that the third concert will be canceled. She goes looking for Mr Holohan and insists that despite the cancellation, Kathleen should still get her eight guineas. But he tells her to talk to Mr Fitzpatrick, and Fitzpatrick, too, seems unable to guarantee anything. Before the last concert, Mrs Kearney explains the situation to her husband, who decides to go with her to the last show.

Unluckily, the last concert takes place on a rainy night. When Mrs Kearney can't find Mr Fitzpatrick or Mr Holohan before the concert to ask them about Kathleen's payment, she talks to Miss Beirne, a Committee member who is not particularly helpful and fairly resigned to the concert being a failure. The "artistes," including Mr Duggan, Mr Bell, Miss Healy, and Madam Glynn, all arrive and awkwardly mingle as Mrs Kearney continues her search for Holohan and Fitzpatrick. Meanwhile, Mr Hendrick, a reporter from the *Freeman*, a daily Irish Nationalist newspaper, stands talking with Miss Healy, who appears to have a crush on him. Although Hendrick is supposed to report on the concert, he doesn't actually like music and tells Mr Holohan that Mr O'Madden Burke will write the report instead. However, when Mr Holohan invites Hendrick to have a drink before he leaves, they find Mr O'Madden Burke drinking in a room far from where the concert will take place.

Meanwhile, Mrs Kearney has an intense conversation with her husband. Although it is time for the concert to start, Kathleen isn't signaling the first performer, Mr Bell, to get ready. As the Kearneys debate something among themselves, the performers—especially Mr Bell—grow increasingly tense. Mr Holohan enters the room and Mrs Kearney tells him that Kathleen won't perform until she gets her eight guineas. Kathleen stays silent as her mother and Mr Holohan argue, and Mr Holohan leaves the room. The performers talk awkwardly until Mr Holohan comes back with Mr Fitzpatrick, who gives Mrs Kearney some money and tells her that she'll get the other half during intermission. Mrs Kearney tells him that he's four shillings short of four guineas, but Kathleen tells Mr Bell to get started anyway.

Backstage, the performers gossip about who is in the right: the Committee or Mrs Kearney. The Committee members think Mrs Kearney has treated them badly, and Mrs Kearney thinks the Committee has treated *her* badly—and wouldn't have treated her that way if she were a man. At intermission, the Committee decides not to pay Mrs Kearney anything, and when she and Mr Holohan have their final argument, she mocks him to his face in front of everyone. In doing so, she turns everyone against her and her family, and the Committee decides to replace Kathleen for the remainder of the concert. With their family reputation and Kathleen's music career in ruins, the Kearneys leave the concert and O'Madden Burke assures Mr Holohan that he did the right thing.

CHARACTERS

Mrs Kearney – Mrs Kearney is a stubborn, upper-class, well-educated woman who lives in Dublin, Ireland. She is Mr Kearney's wife and Kathleen Kearney's mother. Her wealth has made her life comfortable, but the opportunities available to her when she was young made marriage her only path to financial security. Her marriage to her husband is pleasant but passionless, and she is invested in appearing successful: she gives her daughters the best possible educations, brags about her vacations, and helps Kathleen gain a reputation in the Irish Nationalist movement. Despite the fact that she only joins the Nationalist movement for the social clout, she gets involved in helping Mr Holohan, assistant secretary of the *Eire Abu* Society, plan a series of concerts. Leveraging her abilities as a socially respectable hostess, she gets Mr Holohan to sign a contract for four nights of Kathleen's piano-playing at the concerts, demanding an amount (**eight guineas)** that pointedly reflects her aristocratic standing. Finally, on the fourth night of the concert series, Mrs Kearney gets into a public argument with Mr Fitzpatrick, Mr Holohan, and the rest of the Committee over their reluctance or inability to pay the eight guineas, which devolves to the point that they decide not to pay her anything. Enraged, Mrs Kearney mocks Mr Holohan to his face in front of a room full of performing "**artistes**," turning everyone against her. In that moment, her stubbornness ruins her family's reputation and her daughter's musical career in Dublin all at once.

Mr Holohan – Mr Holohan is an inexperienced, rather ineffectual event planner and the assistant secretary of the *Eire Abu* Society who attempts to plan and advertise a series of four concerts celebrating Ireland's culture. At the beginning of the story, Mr Holohan is fairly passive and easily manipulated. After Mrs Kearney provides him with food and wine, he enlists her to help him plan the concerts and invites her daughter, Kathleen, a fairly famous young pianist, to play the accompaniments for the performers. He signs a contract with Mrs Kearney for **eight guineas**, but when the concerts go poorly the first two nights and the Committee cancels the third, he becomes cagey about when—and whether—Kathleen will get her money. On the fourth night, after Mrs Kearney mocks him to his face, Mr Holohan accuses her of being unladylike, humiliating her in front of all the performers. Angry, he replaces Kathleen with Miss Healy, and he wins general approval for finally standing up to Mrs Kearney.

Kathleen – Kathleen is Mrs Kearney's daughter. Because her mother married Mr Kearney, a wealthy bootmaker in Dublin, she receives a top-notch education like her mother's. However, unlike her mother, she is able to continue her advanced musical study after school and has the potential for an independent musical career. Her mother hires an Irish teacher for her and gets her involved with the Irish Nationalist movement so that she can gain fame in Dublin, and ultimately makes a contract with a concert promoter for an Irish Nationalist organization, Mr Holohan, for **eight guineas** if Kathleen will play the piano at four concerts. Kathleen submissively goes along with her mother's demands as Mrs Kearney gets more and more frustrated with the state of each concert and the contract's apparent flimsiness, up until the fourth concert. When Mrs Kearney prevents her from playing until she is paid, she complies with her wishes. But when Mr Holohan and Mr Fitzpatrick pay her half the money, she defies her mother's wishes and starts the concert. Although Kathleen is the famous name in the Kearney family, Joyce never provides the reader with insight into her thoughts, suggesting how stuck she is in complying with her mother's demands. Her sudden resistance is only momentary and is left unexplained, inviting the reader to wonder whether she is capable of breaking out from her mother's control.

Mr Fitzpatrick – Mr Fitzpatrick is the secretary of the *Eire Abu* Society. Mr Fitzpatrick has a "flat" Dublin accent and a "vacant" face, and he doesn't seem too disappointed when the concert doesn't go well. When Mrs Kearney meets him, he is wearing a **brown** hat, associating him with the dullness and decay Joyce felt pervaded Dublin at the turn of the 20th century. At the Thursday night concert, he behaves disruptively, talking loudly with his friends during the performance and irritating Mrs Kearney. When Mr Holohan refers Mrs Kearney to him to get her money before the Saturday concert, he doesn't seem to be able to help her. Mrs Kearney prevents Kathleen from playing without pay, so Mr Fitzpatrick pays her half—actually, four shillings short of half—of the **eight guineas** she was promised to placate her. However, like the other members of the Society, he ultimately doesn't seem too invested in either the concert series or Irish Nationalist goals.

Mr Kearney – Mr Kearney is a wealthy bootmaker, Mrs Kearney's husband, and Kathleen Kearney's father. Mrs Kearney marries him for financial security rather than love, and although they respect one another, their relationship is mostly pragmatic and transactional. He is a pious, frugal, churchgoing man, and his **brown** beard connects him to the dullness and sense of stagnation that Joyce saw in turn-of-the-20th-century Dublin. He is a good husband and father, giving his daughters a good education and paying for Kathleen to continue her music education. When Mrs Kearney gets Kathleen involved in the Irish Nationalist movement for the social advantages, he goes along with it. But despite his reputation and sober-minded demeanor, he is little help when Mrs Kearney brings him along to the Irish Nationalist concert series to help her negotiate Kathleen's pay with the *Eire Abu* Society, and he placidly follows her when she gets angry at Mr Holohan and forces her family to leave the concert early.

Miss Beirne – When Mrs Kearney asks around to see if there are any Committee members present on the fourth night of the

concert series, a steward introduces her to Miss Beirne, one of the Committee secretaries. Miss Beirne can't provide much help and seems mildly disappointed but not particularly surprised when it looks like the fourth concert isn't off to a good start. Miss Beirne appears to be the first Committee member to suggest that they not pay Mrs Kearney the second half of her money.

Mr Bell – Mr Bell is one of the **artistes** in the Saturday night concert: the second tenor. He competes every year at the Feis Ceoil, an Irish music festival, but has only won one bronze medal in four years. He is a nervous man and jealous of other tenors. Although he is set to take the stage first, when Mrs Kearney stalls the concert over Kathleen's contract, he gets increasingly anxious until Kathleen Kearney decides to ignore her mother and tell him to go on. He takes Mrs Kearney's side in the disagreement between her, Mr Holohan, and Mr Fitzpatrick until she mocks Mr Holohan. Joyce's descriptions of Mr Bell highlight how pitiful the talent is at the concert series.

Mr Duggan – Mr Duggan is another one of the **artistes**—namely, the bass—in the Saturday night concert. He comes from a humble background as a hall porter's son and worked his way up to subbing for the opera singer who played the king in the opera *Maritana* when he got sick. Although he is an excellent singer, he reveals his lower-class roots by wiping his nose onstage and saying "yous." He takes the Committee's side in the conflict between Mr Holohan, Mr Fitzpatrick, and Mrs Kearney. Mr Duggan's humble roots contrast with Mrs Kearney's wealthy background, helping to exaggerate the discrepancy between Mrs Kearney's expectations and the concert's reality.

Miss Healy – Miss Healy is one of Kathleen Kearney's friends from the Irish Nationalist movement and one of the **artistes**, the contralto, at the Saturday night concert. Miss Healy flirts with Mr Hendrick before the concert, supposedly for the social mobility that either getting a positive review or a suitor would give her, before getting caught in the middle of the conflict between Mrs Kearney, Mr Holohan, and Mr Fitzpatrick. Although she sides with the Committee members in the conflict between the Society and Mrs Kearney, she pretends to agree with Mrs Kearney to save face until the whole crowd turns against her.

Madam Glynn – Madam Glynn is a very thin, anxious-looking soprano from London. As a subtly English-colonial presence in the concert, Madam Glynn sings *Killarney* in a "bodiless" voice, using outdated intonations while looking as if she has been "resurrected," casting the Englishwoman as a corpselike presence at the concert to reflect colonization's continued effect on Dublin.

Mr Hendrick – Mr Hendrick is a reporter with the *Freeman*, a daily Irish Nationalist newspaper. He is supposed to report on the Saturday night concert, but instead spends his time flirting with the contralto, Miss Healy, and sets his sights on leaving early before being invited to have a drink with Mr Holohan. Although he tasks Mr O'Madden Burke with writing the report, Burke is away from the performance, drinking. Mr Hendrick contributes to the apathy and corruption of the Irish Nationalist movement.

Mr O'Madden Burke – Mr Hendrick tasks Mr O'Madden Burke with writing the report about the Saturday night concert when he decides to leave early. However, O'Madden Burke spends the beginning of his night drinking far away from the concert hall. Although O'Madden Burke faces financial trouble, he is "widely respected." When Mrs Kearney forces Kathleen to delay her performance until she is paid, O'Madden Burke calls her actions "scandalous," and he ultimately makes the final, positive judgment of Mr Holohan's decision to replace Kathleen as accompanist.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

CLASS, AMBITION, AND CORRUPTION

In "A Mother," Joyce describes Mrs Kearney as an upper-class, educated woman. She attended school at a "high-class" convent, learned skills that made her an attractive prospective wife, and married her husband for financial security rather than romance. But despite her comfortable lifestyle, including regular vacations and good educations and dowries for her daughters, she still feels compelled to climb the social and economic ladder and will take advantage of the people around her to do so. By depicting how Mrs Kearney takes advantage of the Irish Nationalist cause to secure fame for her daughter and attempts to use her position—and wine—to take advantage of the concert promoter, Mr Holohan, Joyce suggests that ambitious upper-class Irish people tend to be corrupt, attempting to manipulate people, as well as social and political causes, for their own personal gain.

Joyce's descriptions of Mrs Kearney's upper-class upbringing suggest that growing up wealthy taught her to view her abilities and her relationships with other people as opportunities for personal gain. Mrs Kearney was educated at a convent, an option that was only available to wealthy Catholic women. Her "naturally" stubborn ways made it hard for her to make friends at school or make compromises when looking for a husband. While she learned piano at school, her musical talents were only useful for impressing potential suitors, which was the only

way she could make a name for herself. By describing her stubbornness as "natural," Joyce invites the reader to consider whether it is truly a result of an innate personal quality or a characteristic to be expected of wealthy people. And since Mrs Kearney could only find social and economic success via marriage, and people started to gossip about her when she remained unmarried for an unusually long time, she married Mr Kearney for money rather than love. She sacrifices romance for a life of comfort, vacations, and financial stability—suggesting that personal happiness is less important to her than her social status.

Having established this pattern of self-promotion, Mrs Kearney even uses her marriage and her daughter's accomplishments to promote her family's status. While Mr and Mrs Kearney learn to respect and live with each other, Mrs Kearney never stops seeking to climb the social ladder. With her husband's money, she has more resources to do so: she gives her daughter, Kathleen, even more advantages than she had by sending her to the Royal Irish Academy of Music and getting her involved in the Nationalist movement, through which she could gain influence for the whole family. Mrs Kearney's wealth makes it easy for her to provide Mr Holohan with all the wine it takes to convince him to sign a contract with her for **eight guineas**. The guinea was out of circulation during the time of "A Mother," and it was only used in wealthy people's business transactions. Thus, its appearance is a sure sign that Mrs Kearney draws up her contract to make herself appear aristocratic.

Rather than take part in social life in earnest, Mrs Kearney always does so with an eye to personal gain. Mrs Kearney has Kathleen learn Irish and becomes a fixture in the Nationalist movement only when it becomes popular and fashionable. Moreover, she never actually speaks any Irish in "A Mother," instead speaking the French she learned with her upper-class convent education. It's clear, then, that Mrs Kearney regards the Nationalist movement primarily as a means of social climbing, not as a political commitment for its own sake. Likewise, Mrs Kearney's interest in the *Eire Abu* Society's concert series is less about celebrating Irish culture than it is about securing fame for her daughter and money for herself. Even while attending the concert series, she looks down on the Society members, the performers, and even the audience for not being up to her upper-class standards, again showing that she isn't interested in Society participation for its own sake. Since she can't look past the concert's appearances or shift her focus from the eight guineas Kathleen was promised, Mrs Kearney ends up making a scene and causing her own social downfall. Ironically, then, Mrs Kearney's fixation on personal gain finally undermines the status she's spent her life fighting to maintain.

IRISH NATIONALISM, COLONIZATION, AND FAILURE

"A Mother" takes place during the time of the late-19th- and early-20th-century Irish Revival, a movement to uplift Ireland's precolonial Gaelic and Celtic language and culture. While the Irish Nationalist movement was intended to help the Irish people to resist their English oppressors and celebrate their own culture, the Kearneys only take part in the Irish Nationalist movement to benefit themselves, since the movement is both fashionable and lucrative for them. In addition to the movement's self-interested members, its leaders lack vision and competence. Joyce demonstrates these qualities with the fictional *Eire Abu* Society, which catastrophically fails to organize a successful four-night concert series celebrating Ireland's culture—and its leaders don't seem to be that disappointed by their failure. In this way, "A Mother" critiques the Irish Nationalist movement of Joyce's time for its disorganization, apathy, inexperience, and corruption.

While the Irish Nationalist movement is a political centerpiece of "A Mother," rather than reflect the actual politics of Irish Nationalism, it appears to be a social outlet for the Kearneys. The Kearneys only get involved in Irish Nationalism when the Irish Revival becomes "appreciable." Once Mrs Kearney notices the Irish Revival becoming more popular, she has Kathleen learn Irish, not because she actually seems invested in the Irish language and Irish independence, but because she sees an opportunity for Kathleen to make a name for herself: Kathleen shares a name with a traditional Irish figure, Kathleen ni Houlihan, which would help boost her notoriety. Furthermore, rather than discuss anything about Irish political independence from England, the Kearneys mostly exchange gossip with their Nationalist friends. Their opportunistic and shallow involvement in Nationalism demonstrates that for them (and perhaps for many upper-class Nationalists), the movement is only appealing as a means of social advancement.

Even the members of the *Eire Abu* Society, a fictional Irish Nationalist group whose name translates to "Ireland to Victory," don't take much care in planning the concerts or ensuring their success, suggesting that they're actually not all that invested in the issues surrounding Ireland's colonial subjugation, either. Mr Holohan seems completely inexperienced in event-planning, to the point that he relies on Mrs Kearney's advice on nearly everything, and when the first concert goes awry, he is nonchalant about letting the first three concerts fail without intervention. When the first concert seems bound to fail, the Committee Secretary, Mr Fitzpatrick, doesn't seem to be that disappointed—or surprised—and he takes advantage of the rowdy atmosphere at the second concert to talk loudly with his friends during the performances, suggesting he's indifferent to the concerts' success. Miss Beirne, a Society Committee member, can't seem to get ahold of any of the other Committee

members, and seems fairly resigned to the fact that the Society did their "best" in planning the concerts. When she gets together with all the Committee members at the fourth concert, they seem disorganized as a group and caught off guard by Mrs Kearney's demands. And although the Committee invites reporters from a Nationalist newspaper to report on the concerts, even the reporters, Mr Hendrick and Mr O'Madden Burke, don't seem interested in the performances or in the politics of Irish Nationalism in general. From Joyce's descriptions, the *Eire Abu* Society seems ironically named: they are completely unprepared to bring Ireland to victory in any sense, and by implication, their disorganization and apathy illuminate part of the reason why Ireland's Nationalist movements have yet to secure freedom for the Irish people.

Like Mrs Kearney, the Committee members and other Nationalists seem to take advantage of the concerts for their own personal gain. But, unlike Mrs Kearney, they don't take its failures personally. Mr Fitzpatrick, Mr Holohan, Mr Hendrick, and Mr O'Madden Burke each use the concerts they attend to drink, socialize, and flirt, and none of them even seem to pay attention to the performances that are supposed to celebrate Ireland's culture. The concerts' publicity failures seem to strike the reporters and committee members as commonplace, as well as their hesitancy to pay Kathleen, given the low numbers at the box office. Indeed, what they find "scandalous" is Mrs Kearney's reaction to their disorganization and apathy—suggesting that they don't see the cause as worth getting worked up about. Overall, Joyce suggests that the Committee members' failure reflects the overall history of failed Irish Nationalist rebellions and the stagnation of the movement after it was co-opted by the wealthy and by people more interested in their own success than in Irish independence.

PARALYSIS AND DECAY

When he wrote *Dubliners*, James Joyce believed that the decades of conflict in Ireland, whether between the Irish and their English colonizers, or between Catholics and Protestants, had left the Irish people in a state of "paralysis": cultural, economic, and political stagnation that led to the decline of Irish society. Many of the characters in "A Mother" seem to be afflicted with some sort of paralysis: Mr Holohan, the inexperienced concert promoter for the Irish Nationalist *Eire Abu* Society, has a bad leg; Mrs Kearney fixates on her daughter's eight-guinea payment; and Kathleen Kearney seems to sit idly by for much of the story and allow her mother to make all her decisions for her. As the final night of *Eire Abu*'s concert series stalls because of the devolving dispute between Mrs Kearney and the Society Committee over Kathleen's pay, Joyce draws parallels between their relatively inconsequential disagreement and the larger conflicts plaguing turn-of-the-20th-century Ireland to highlight the roots of Ireland's paralysis.

Mr Holohan's bad leg is the first sign of Ireland's paralysis in "A Mother," suggesting that organizations like the *Eire Abu* Society aren't a very effective means of promoting Irish Nationalism. When Joyce dedicates the first paragraph of "A Mother" to describing Mr Holohan, Holohan's most prominent feature is his "game leg" that makes him walk with a limp and leads to his friends calling him "Hoppy Holohan." Since Mr Holohan is the face of the *Eire Abu* Society when advertising for the concert, his leg simultaneously foreshadows the limping start that the concert series will have before gaining an audience and suggests the "limp" and hobbled state of the Irish Nationalist movement at the time. Towards the end of "A Mother," when Mrs Kearney watches Mr Holohan like a predator as he limps around backstage, Joyce hints at one reason for the Nationalist movement's troubles: wealthy Dubliners taking advantage of the movement's opportunities for social gain. Overall, his bad leg is an omen for the overall ineffectiveness of the *Eire Abu* Society: none of the Society members seem qualified for their position—or seem to understand what their position *is*—and all of them have a difficult time acting when problems arise.

By overshadowing the final concert's Nationalist aims with her personal fixation on getting her daughter's **eight guineas**, Mrs Kearney contributes to the *Eire Abu* Society's disorganization and failure, revealing how individuals' limitations and paralyses can bring down an entire movement. By describing how Mrs Kearney uses Nationalism to make a name for her daughter and enhance her family's reputation, Joyce establishes that she is not actually invested in the Irish Nationalist cause. Thus, when she takes pains to help Mr Holohan order the performers, make the bills, and sell tickets, the reader knows that she does so not to advance the Nationalist cause in Ireland but to co-opt its popularity for her own gain, keeping her stuck in her self-serving ways and, in turn, contributing to the stagnation of the Nationalist cause. Her concern with the concerts' failure is also not about the Nationalist message failing to get out, but about her daughter's money—the concerts have already faced enough challenges, and Mrs Kearney's decision to keep Kathleen from playing until she is paid represents just another petty obstacle to Nationalist success in Ireland.

Finally, one of the most paralyzed characters in "A Mother" is Kathleen Kearney—but she also shows the surest signs that she might be able to break out of her paralysis. Throughout "A Mother," Kathleen is talked *about* far more often than she talks; Joyce never gives the reader insight into her thoughts, and although the concert is supposed to be Kathleen's career opportunity, Mrs Kearney ends up micromanaging the whole thing and taking center stage. Even while Mrs Kearney and Mr Holohan's argument gets most heated, Kathleen only stares at her shoes and keeps quiet, following her mother's directions without question. However, Kathleen is only performing at the

concert because it is a good opportunity for her to gain exposure and have a career of her own. While Mrs Kearney and Mr Holohan remain locked in their dispute, Kathleen manages to overcome her paralysis before her mother's demands and start the Saturday night concert without full payment, suggesting that, whatever her views about Ireland's broader problems, she is less set in her ways than the older characters in the story. Kathleen's quiet breakthrough hints that there's hope for the younger generation to carry on the cause in a more proactive and effective way.

GENDER AND POWER

In "A Mother," Mrs Kearney is an ambitious, upper-class, educated woman who mistreats the people of the *Eire Abu* Society whom she deems beneath her. While she ends up ruining her family's reputation and her daughter's music career with her efforts to climb the social ladder, Joyce also includes details about Mrs Kearney that invite the reader to pity her: as a woman, her piano-playing was only seen as useful for its ability to charm a husband, while her daughter's musical talent could secure her a career of her own. Furthermore, since Mrs Kearney could not marry for love, she had to marry for improved social status and financial gain. And rather than exercise her power directly or command the kind of respect her husband does, she can only turn circumstances to her advantage by convincing more powerful men to do what she says. The details Joyce includes about Mrs Kearney's upbringing, her views of her husband, and her final argument with Mr Holohan reveal how her abilities to gain respect and power in society are colored by her gender, making her a more sympathetic character.

While Joyce's descriptions of Mrs Kearney's wealth emphasize the privileges she has in life, they also point out how limited her power is in shaping her own life. Although Mrs Kearney attended an upper-class school, her talents were only cultivated in order to attract a husband—and her choosiness in doing so only made her the subject of negative gossip. Unlike Kathleen, Mrs Kearney did not appear to have the option of channeling her musical talents into a career. Instead, she had to rely on marriage to shape her financial and social future, meaning she ultimately married for wealth instead of love. Ultimately, although her life is comfortable and she and Mr Kearney respect one another, Mrs Kearney appears to be dissatisfied with her position and to live vicariously through her daughter's successes.

Mrs Kearney's views of the men around her bring to light the gendered power imbalances at the turn of the 20th century in Dublin. Mr and Mrs Kearney's marriage is a social and financial transaction more than a decision made for love: Mrs Kearney seems invested in appearing like a happy, prosperous family when she describes her vacations to her friends, but her relationship with her husband seems distant. When she thinks of her husband, she views him as "secure and fixed" like the post office. And, although she does not find him particularly personally impressive, she recognizes his "abstract value as a male," suggesting that her view of her husband is largely pragmatic: he is a means to an end.

When she encounters Mr Holohan, Mrs Kearney appears to view him as a means to an end, too. To convince him to agree to her desired contract terms, Mrs Kearney must play the hostess, keeping him supplied with plenty of food and wine to gain his favor. In this way, she leverages a traditionally feminine role to influence the hapless man who actually holds power. Finally, when Mrs Kearney's argument with the Committee members approaches its peak, she immediately thinks that they would have taken her more seriously if she were a man. In particular, the moment she decides to make sure that Kathleen gets her "rights" suggests that the conflict is about more than just the **eight guineas** Mr Holohan promised her: it is about how she is treated—and how Kathleen will be treated—as a woman mostly doing business with men.

Mr Holohan's remark to Mrs Kearney after she mocks him confirms her suspicion that he is using her gender to his advantage: he accuses Mrs Kearney of not being a "lady," which implies that she is both a lower-class (thus, lower-quality) person and a particularly lower-quality *woman*. When Mr Holohan makes this comment, he takes advantage of the fact that the only power Mrs Kearney has is social: the power of her reputation and of her ability to influence other people. By humiliating her in front of everyone, therefore, he undermines what power she has. And since Mrs Kearney does indeed fall short of societal expectations of a "lady," all the onlookers agree with Mr Holohan. They are primed to be biased: patriarchal expectations mean that they see Mr Holohan's anger as justified and Mrs Kearney's as excessive. But because her outburst is fairly tame, the reader can see just how thin a line Mrs Kearney must walk to maintain her reputation, the source of her power. In this respect, Joyce subtly criticizes the patriarchal expectations of his day and prompts readers' sympathy for the position of women like Mrs Kearney.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

EIGHT GUINEAS

The eight guineas symbolize both Mrs Kearney's desire for social status and the outdated beliefs that ultimately undermine that status. When Mrs Kearney and Mr Holohan draw up a contract for Kathleen's performance at the four concerts, they decide that she will receive eight guineas in payment. The guinea was a gold coin that circulated

in Britain from 1663 to 1814. But since "A Mother" takes place in Dublin at the turn of the 20th century, the "guinea" would not have actually been in use—indeed, rather than a single coin, Mr Fitzpatrick gives Mrs Kearney four banknotes that don't even add up to the four guineas he promised her before the concert. Around the time Joyce wrote "A Mother," the guinea was more of a status symbol: only upper-class transactions like legal fees, animal sales, and bets at horse and greyhound races happened in guineas. People used guineas as a unit of measure mostly to make their financial transactions seem more aristocratic. And given Mrs Kearney's upper-class background and her social and economic ambition, it follows that she would want her contracts made out in guineas, especially after flaunting her wealth to Mr Holohan by bringing him refreshments in a "silver biscuit barrel."

Moreover, since the guinea would not have been in circulation at the time "A Mother" is set, it suggests the theme of paralysis: rather than move on from this outdated, upper-class symbol, Mrs Kearney insists upon it, and becomes so fixated on her eight-guinea payment that she brings the entire final concert to a screeching halt. Her outdated beliefs based on her social class—marrying for wealth, looking down on the less-wealthy, and seeking to increase her wealth at any personal cost—result in her demands for special treatment from the *Eire Abu* Society, and end up ruining her family's reputation and her daughter's career in the process. By stubbornly failing to adjust to the idea that her daughter's performance is about more than just eight guineas, she brings about her own downfall.

BROWN

In "A Mother," Joyce uses the color brown to symbolize the dullness and decline of turn-of-the-20th-century Dublin, particularly the aspects of Dublin that have not changed in so long that they show signs of decay. The first time the color brown appears in "A Mother" is when Joyce describes Mr Kearney's "great brown beard," indicating that he is a part of the reason Dublin is so dull and stuck in time. Other textual details about Mr Kearney associate him with the things that Joyce felt kept Dublin suspended in time: he is wealthy, serious, pious, and a regular churchgoer, and he only gets involved in the Irish Nationalist movement when it becomes culturally fashionable for wealthy Dubliners to do so. By amassing wealth, strictly adhering to his religion, and only getting involved in political movements for personal gain, Mr Kearney displays the signs of Dublin's decay that Joyce spoke out against.

The other character Joyce associates with brown is Mr Fitzpatrick, the secretary of the *Eire Abu* Society: he describes how Mr Fitzpatrick wears his "soft brown hat carelessly on the side of his head." Like Mr Kearney, Mr Fitzpatrick is also self-serving. He doesn't seem to care when the concerts go poorly, is difficult to get ahold of when things go wrong, and instead takes advantage of the concerts' casual atmosphere to talk loudly with friends during the performance. The way he wears his brown hat reflects how careless he is in his dealings with other people, marking him as just another Dubliner who only looks out for himself, keeping the city stuck in its ways.

ARTISTES

The word "*artistes*" symbolizes **Mrs. Kearney**'s upper-class pretensions and lack of genuine regard for Irish Nationalism. The French term appears in italics nine times throughout "A Mother," and only Mrs Kearney ever speaks it out loud. When juxtaposed with descriptions of the subpar performers at the four concerts, it serves as an ironic reminder that Mrs Kearney is not used to being around lower-class people and that she is incapable of adjusting her expectations to changing circumstances. Moreover, although she is involved in the Irish Nationalist movement, Joyce never depicts her actually *speaking* any Irish. Instead, she turns to French, the language she learned at her "high-class" convent. Since Irish knowledge usually indicated a poor, working-class, or politically radical Irish person in late-19th- and early-20th-century Dublin, Mrs Kearney's French makes her stick out among the Irish Nationalists, revealing how little she actually cares about the cause compared to how much she cares about the recognition it brings her and her family.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *Dubliners* published in 1993.

A Mother Quotes

❝ Miss Devlin had become Mrs Kearney out of spite. She had been educated in a high-class convent where she had learned French and music. As she was naturally pale and unbending in manner she made few friends at school. When she came to the age of marriage she was sent out to many houses where her playing and ivory manners were much admired. She sat amid the chilly circle of her accomplishments, waiting for some suitor to brave it and offer her a brilliant life.

Related Characters: Mrs Kearney

Related Themes:

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Joyce establishes Mrs Kearney's wealth, as well as her lack of power compared to wealthy men around her. Despite her "high-class" education and her impressive piano-playing, Mrs Kearney's musical talent is only useful for attracting a husband—choosing a spouse was the only way she could actively determine what kind of life she would live. The "natural" stubbornness that Joyce describes, and that will play a part in how she acts in the story, can be read multiple ways: the reader might see her stubbornness as an inherent personal quality or as a response to her lack of power as a woman in 19th-century Dublin. If she only has social power—the power to choose friends and a partner—it makes sense that she would take extra care in making those choices, particularly since she was not impressed by most of the men who courted her.

He sent the elder daughter, Kathleen, to a good convent, where she learned French and music and afterwards paid her fees at the Academy. Every year in the month of July Mrs Kearney found occasion to say to some friend:

"My good man is packing us off to Skerries for a few weeks."

If it was not Skerries it was Howth or Greystones.

Related Characters: Mrs Kearney (speaker), Kathleen, Mr Kearney

Related Themes:

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

This passage begins to emphasize the difference between Mrs Kearney's life and Kathleen's: while they both come from wealthy families and thus receive similar educations, Kathleen's life diverges from her mother's when she is able to pursue an advanced education in music at the Academy. Her advanced education prepares her not for marriage, as Mrs Kearney's did, but for an independent musical career. Moreover, the details Joyce includes about Mrs Kearney talking up her family vacations reveals her concern with keeping up appearances. Since she sacrificed romance for financial prosperity and a life of comfort, she makes sure the people around her know how well-off she and her family are. Together, these details establish the importance of social status in Mrs Kearney's life above all other concerns, even personal happiness. The passage also suggests that in certain ways—like the possibility of translating her musical education into a future career—Kathleen will enjoy opportunities that weren't open to women of her mother's generation.

When the Irish Revival began to be appreciable Mrs Kearney determined to take advantage of her daughter's name and brought an Irish teacher to the house [...] On special Sundays when Mr Kearney went with his family to the pro-cathedral a little crowd of people would assemble after mass at the corner of Cathedral Street. They were all friends of the Kearneys - musical friends or Nationalist friends and, when they had played every little counter of gossip, they shook hands with one another all together, laughing at the crossing of so many hands and said good-bye to one another in Irish.

Related Characters: Mrs Kearney, Mr Kearney, Kathleen

Related Themes:

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Joyce describes how the Irish Revival, a period of renewed interest in precolonial Irish Celtic and Gaelic music, literature, and languages, becomes respectable in Dublin. Although the Revival began as a subset of the politically radical Irish Nationalist movement, which sought to secure political and cultural independence for the Irish people and resist English colonial oppression, this "appreciable," popular version of the Revival waters down the tenets of Nationalism to a mere fad. Mrs Kearney takes an interest in Irish Nationalism solely because she sees a path to fame and financial gain for her family, and the Kearneys overall use their Nationalist ties as an outlet for sharing gossip rather than as a means of political resistance. The Kearneys' relationship to Nationalism suggests that, according to Joyce, wealthy people in Dublin co-opted radical political movements for their own ends—namely, increased social status or financial gain. Furthermore, these co-optations played a hand in keeping the Nationalist movement from effecting real change in Ireland, since many of its proponents were not actually invested in the greater cause.

Therefore she was not surprised when one day Mr Holohan came to her and proposed that her daughter should be the accompanist at a series of four grand concerts which his Society was going to give in the Antient Concert Rooms. She brought him into the drawing-room, made him sit down and brought out the decanter and the silver biscuit barrel. She entered heart and soul into the details of the enterprise, advised and dissuaded; and finally a contract was drawn up by which Kathleen was to receive eight guineas for her services as accompanist at the four grand concerts.

Related Characters: Mrs Kearney, Mr Holohan, Mrs Kearney, Kathleen

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 136

Explanation and Analysis

When Mrs Kearney tempts Mr Holohan with the silver biscuit barrel and wine, she takes advantage of her feminine "hostess" role to talk Mr Holohan into an eight-guinea contract he might not have agreed to otherwise. She leverages her femininity and her wealth against his inexperience, and the contract they settle on for eight guineas reveals even more about her aims in getting her daughter involved in the concert series: at the time "A Mother" is set, the guinea coin was no longer in circulation in Ireland. However, wealthy people still made many of their business transactions in guineas. By requesting eight guineas, Mrs Kearney demonstrates how much she buys into outdated ideas about wealth and attempts to appear more aristocratic than she is. The detail that she enters "heart and soul" into the concert-planning, however, suggests that she is much more invested, and differently invested, in it than Mr Holohan—while Mr Holohan is generally inexperienced and fairly careless in his planning, Mrs Kearney places her whole self on the line while planning, hinting that any failures in the concerts might reflect back on her negatively, not just as a planner like Mr Holohan, but as a woman with less social power overall.

When she had an opportunity she called Mr Holohan aside and asked him to tell her what it meant. Mr Holohan did not know what it meant. 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."

Related Characters: Mrs Kearney (speaker), Mr Holohan

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mrs Kearney confronts Mr Holohan about why the turnout for the first concert is so low. Mr Holohan reveals his ineptitude—and his Society's—when he can't account for why so few people have come to the first concert and can only assume that they planned too many shows. His inadequate explanation and overall careless attitude towards the concert's failure gives the reader more hints as to why the Nationalist movement is stagnating in Ireland: not only are wealthy people taking advantage of it for personal gain (like Mrs Kearney), but the people who ought to be on top of organizing are incapable of doing so. When Mrs Kearney tells Mr Holohan that the "artistes" are bad, she interjects a French word—likely learned at school—into her everyday conversation, a strange and pretentious habit which not only reflects ironically on the poor talent present at the concerts, but also shows how out of place the wealthy Mrs Kearney is in a poorly-run Nationalist Society concert.

She called Mr Fitzpatrick away from his screen and told him that her daughter had signed for four concerts and that, of course, according to the terms of the contract, she should receive the sum originally stipulated for whether the society gave the four concerts or not. Mr Fitzpatrick, who did not catch the point at issue very quickly, seemed unable to resolve the difficulty and said that he would bring the matter before the Committee. Mrs Kearney's anger began to flutter in her cheek and she had all she could do to keep from asking:

"And who is the *Cometty*, pray?"

But she knew that it would not be ladylike to do that: so she was silent.

Related Characters: Mrs Kearney (speaker), Mr Fitzpatrick, Kathleen

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mrs Kearney's insistence on payment for her daughter despite the concerts' changing circumstances—poor turnout on Wednesday and Thursday as well as a cancellation on Friday—demonstrates her stubbornness and her focus on using the Nationalist cause for personal gain. She is not concerned about the concerts' failure for their own sake, but for her own reputation and her daughter's paycheck. Her social ambitions and desire to enhance her wealth prevent her from being flexible, and Mr Fitzpatrick's stonewalling of her questions reveals how inept all members of the Society appear to be. The inefficacy of the Committee and lack of communication between the Society members in "A Mother" reflects poorly on the entire Nationalist movement, casting it as disorganized and incapable of undertaking basic tasks or facing ordinary challenges.

Mrs Kearney also wants to mock Mr Fitzpatrick for his lower-class accent, another manifestation of her classism. However, her thought about remaining ladylike in public casts Mr Fitzpatrick's dismissiveness in a different light: Joyce invites the reader to wonder whether Mr Fitzpatrick would be so dismissive of Mrs Kearney's concerns if she were a man. By staying silent, Mrs Kearney once again sacrifices expressing her real feelings to maintain appearances, prioritizing her social status over her deeper desires. In this case, maintaining that status is necessary for her as a woman whose power is determined by her reputation.

He listened carefully and said that perhaps it would be better if he went with her on Saturday night. She agreed. 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.

Related Characters: Mr Kearney, Mrs Kearney

Related Themes:

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

This passage highlights the gendered discrepancies between Mr and Mrs Kearney's public presences. While Mrs Kearney demonstrates a great deal of influence while trying to convince Mr Holohan to sign a contract with her in her home, she is unable to wrangle him or Mr Fitzpatrick into giving her a straight answer to her questions in public. Because she's a woman, in other words, she doesn't command the same respect in public as she manages to do in private (where she can leverage her hostessing abilities and her wealth). By contrast, Mr Kearney is not particularly personally talented, but people respect him by virtue of the fact that he is a man. By likening him to the post office building in Dublin, Mrs Kearney marks him a kind of relic of the past whose usefulness only persists because people think it is too monumental to replace. By just showing up and mostly remaining silent, Mr Kearney can command greater respect than his more capable wife—suggesting that early 20th century Dublin had a strong patriarchal bias.

The little woman hoped they would have a good house. She looked out at the rain until the melancholy of the wet street effaced all the trustfulness and enthusiasm from her twisted features. Then she gave a little sigh and said:

"Ah, well! We did our best, the dear knows."

Related Characters: Miss Beirne (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 140

Explanation and Analysis

On the last night of the concert series, Mrs Kearney demands to speak to a Committee member, and someone brings Miss Beirne to her. Miss Beirne's response to the concerts' failure reveals that although she is—unlike Mr Fitzpatrick or Mr Holohan—hopeful for a good turnout, she is apparently defeated by past failures. With the rain in the background mirroring everyone's morose attitudes (Miss Beirne's expression sours as she looks outside), Miss Beirne's thought that the Society did their "best" further underlines the Nationalist movement's failures: if this is the best they can do, it makes sense that Ireland has not yet gained independence from England, instead remaining trapped in their defeated sentiments and unrealized hopes. The Society members' attitudes, and the concerts' unimpressive turnout, reflect Joyce's view that Irish Nationalism stagnated thanks to opportunistic and ineffectual people. The best intentions of even well-meaning people like Miss Beirne, in other words, aren't enough to sustain Irish cultural renewal, much less resist

English colonialism, in the long run.

He sang his music with great feeling and volume and was warmly welcomed by the gallery; but, unfortunately, he marred the good impression by wiping his nose in his gloved hand once or twice out of thoughtlessness. He was unassuming and spoke little. He said *yous* so softly that it passed unnoticed and he never drank anything stronger than milk for his voice' sake.

Related Characters: Mr Duggan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 140

Explanation and Analysis

Although Joyce takes a dig at Mr Duggan, the bass, by describing how he drinks milk for his voice—not an effective remedy for a singer—his portrayal of Mr Duggan is more sympathetic than most of the descriptions in "A Mother." As a lower-class Dubliner, Mr Duggan's perspective contrasts with Mrs Kearney's. Whereas she discounts the performers for not being up to her standards, Joyce's description of Mr Duggan reveals how difficult—and lucky—it was for him to have made a name for himself at all. Moreover, Joyce describes how upper-class people stopped him from gaining yet more of a reputation just because his manners weren't perfect, something he seems to have learned from by disguising his lower-class Dublin slang, "yous," when he speaks. By emphasizing these class markers and the tensions they create, Joyce suggests that even within political movements like Irish Nationalism, social status often outranks commitment to the cause in importance.

Mr Holohan became very red and excited. He spoke volubly, but Mrs Kearney said curtly at intervals:

"She won't go on. She must get her eight guineas."

Mr Holohan pointed desperately towards the hall where the audience was clapping and stamping. He appealed to Mr Kearney and to Kathleen. But Mr Kearney continued to stroke his beard and Kathleen looked down moving the point of her new shoe: it was not her fault. Mrs Kearney repeated:

"She won't go on without her money."

Related Characters: Mrs Kearney (speaker), Mr Holohan, Mr Kearney, Kathleen

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mrs Kearney brings the entire fourth concert to a halt by preventing Kathleen from performing until she is paid. Her social ambition and focus on money literally paralyzes the entire concert. Disregarding anyone's feelings but her own, Mrs Kearney's self-serving behavior comes to a head over money. She does not care about the Nationalist cause, nor does she seem to care about Kathleen's apparent discomfort at the conflict. As Kathleen stands beside her, paralyzed and diverting her eyes from the situation, Mr Kearney simply strokes his beard. While he watches without intervening, his beard's color reminds the reader of the decay that, according to Joyce, self-serving people like he and Mrs Kearney have brought onto Ireland. Their behavior exemplifies what Joyce saw as the ineffectual nature of the Irish Nationalism of his day—despite its patriotic ideals, it repeatedly failed to bring about real, lasting change.

Mr Fitzpatrick held a few banknotes in his hand. He counted out four into Mrs Kearney's hand and said she would get the other half at the interval. Mrs Kearney said:

"This is four shillings short."

But Kathleen gathered in her skirt and said: *Now, Mr Bell*, to the first item, who was shaking like an aspen. The singer and the accompanist went out together. The noise in the hall died away. There was a pause of a few seconds: and then the piano was heard.

Related Characters: Mrs Kearney, Kathleen (speaker), Mr Fitzpatrick, Mr Bell

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 145

Explanation and Analysis

As Mr Fitzpatrick partially gives in to Mrs Kearney's

demands and pays her part of the eight guineas she was promised, he miscounts the amount of money he has when he attempts to give her half. Because the guinea was no longer in circulation, it is difficult for him to actually come up with the assortment of money it would take for him to give her eight guineas—the value of the guinea relative to other banknotes, namely the pound and the shilling, fluctuated throughout the guinea's existence, so agreeing upon its actual value in terms of pounds would have been slightly difficult for Mrs Kearney and Mr Fitzpatrick. By relying on the guinea, Mrs Kearney makes getting paid more difficult.

However, when Kathleen tells Mr Bell to start despite the fact that she has not been paid in full, she breaks out of the paralysis that she has been stuck in up to this point, ignoring her mother's demands and performing anyway. Her action suggests that there is hope for the next generation of Dubliners—but Mrs Kearney may have ruined Kathleen's chances at a career, anyway, and since Joyce does not give the reader insight into Kathleen's thoughts, her reasoning remains opaque.

❝ Mrs Kearney said that the Committee had treated her scandalously. She had spared neither trouble nor expense and this was how she was repaid.

They thought they had only a girl to deal with and that, therefore, they could ride roughshod over her. But she would show them their mistake. They wouldn't have dared to have treated her like that if she had been a man. But she would see that her daughter got her rights: she wouldn't be fooled.

Related Characters: Mrs Kearney, Kathleen, Mr Holohan, Mr Fitzpatrick

Related Themes:

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

After Mrs Kearney brings the concert to a halt and confronts Mr Holohan, she determines that her mistreatment was due to her sex. Her anger juxtaposes her (righteous) fear that her daughter will be treated poorly in business dealings with men with her self-serving desire to increase her family's wealth and reputation. Because she had been denied a music career herself and instead had to depend on a man for money, her anger exists at a complex point between her social ambition and her desire to make a better life for her daughter. In other words, the Committee's "scandalous" refusal to pay Kathleen what Mrs Kearney thinks she's owed feels like a personal attack to Mrs Kearney—an insult not just to her family's social status, but also to Kathleen's talent (and thus to Mrs Kearney's own unrealized talent as well). This explains why Mrs Kearney holds her ground in front of the men, even to the point of disrupting the concert.

❝ Her face was inundated with an angry colour and she looked as if she would attack someone with her hands.

"I'm asking for my rights," she said.

"You might have some sense of decency," said Mr Holohan.

"Might I, indeed? ... And when I ask when my daughter is going to be paid I can't get a civil answer."

She tossed her head and assumed a haughty voice:

"You must speak to the secretary. It's not my business. I'm a great fellow fol-the-diddle-I-do."

"I thought you were a lady," said Mr Holohan, walking away from her abruptly.

After that Mrs Kearney's conduct was condemned on all hands: everyone approved of what the Committee had done.

Related Characters: Mrs Kearney, Mr Holohan (speaker), Kathleen, Mr Fitzpatrick

Related Themes:

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mrs Kearney has her final confrontation with Mr Holohan. Rather than bury her feelings in deference to social expectations, she lets her anger fly uninhibited. Beneath her desire for social advancement, Mrs Kearney reveals her desire for something deeper: respect. The petty conflict about eight guineas becomes more about the Committee's inability to communicate honestly with her. As she mocks Mr Holohan in front of an audience and Mr Holohan accuses her of not being a lady, she loses all the respectability that she had. Because, as an upper-class woman, she's expected to maintain a spotless social façade, everyone takes Mr Holohan's side against her. Although her outburst was not particularly offensive, it is enough to ruin her reputation, ironically breaking down the very thing she was fighting for. Mr Holohan's accusation that she was indecent has veiled sexual connotations, and even if the Committee was not treating her poorly because she is a woman, she loses everyone's support because she is

not being the right *kind* of woman (a deferent, agreeable one).

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

A MOTHER

Mr Holohan is the assistant secretary of the *Eire Abu* Society. Because of his bad leg, his friends call him "Hoppy Holohan." He has spent the past month trying to arrange a series of concerts in Dublin, and although he spends a lot of time advertising for the concerts, a woman named Mrs Kearney ends up pulling everything together.

Mr Holohan's limp is the first sign of paralysis in "A Mother." His physical disability mirrors the Irish Nationalist movement's inability to effect change for Ireland in a lasting, meaningful way: both Mr Holohan and the Nationalist movement "limp" along without accomplishing much. And the detail that Mrs Kearney ends up pulling together most of the concert details underscores how ineffective Mr Holohan is as a spokesman for the Nationalist cause.

Mrs Kearney received an education from an upper-class convent, including instruction in music and French. At school, her stubbornness made it difficult for her to make friends. When she was of marrying age, she impressed many people with her manners and her piano playing, but despite her skills, none of the men she met seemed extraordinary enough to give her a "brilliant" life, and she dealt with her disappointment by secretly eating a lot of Turkish Delight. Once she was a bit old to still be unmarried, people started to gossip about her, so she married Mr Kearney, a boot manufacturer, "out of spite."

Joyce's description of Mrs Kearney's past establishes the level of wealth she is accustomed to, complete with a high-class education. And her stubbornness foreshadows the conflict she will get into with the Eire Abu Society. However, the detail that she uses her piano-playing to attract a husband hints at how limited her choices in life are despite her wealth: as a woman, the only way she can actively determine her lifestyle is by choosing whom to marry. In this light, her stubbornness and her high expectations seem more sympathetic as she takes care in choosing what is really best for her. At the same time, when she marries Mr Kearney to silence the gossip about her, she chooses to keep up appearances instead of waiting for real love, revealing how highly she prioritizes her social status.

Mr Kearney is significantly older than Mrs Kearney, and he's very serious. While Mrs Kearney has come to appreciate him and is a good wife, she has never completely abandoned her romantic ideals. Mr Kearney is "sober, thrifty, and pious," has a **brown** beard, and takes Communion on the first Friday of every month with or without his wife.

The age gap between Mr and Mrs Kearney, combined with Joyce's description of Mr Kearney's brown beard, suggests that Mr Kearney represents an older, possibly even outdated version of Ireland. His piety and general aura of seriousness align with the problems that Joyce saw in Dublin: not enough people were willing to disrupt the status quo to revolutionize Irish culture. Mr Kearney's brown beard marks him as a kind of relic of the Irish people, since Joyce uses the color brown to indicate decay throughout Dubliners.

The Kearneys are very attuned to one another's needs and Mr Kearney is a good father, putting money into accounts for his two daughters to ensure that they will each have hundred-pound dowries when they turn 24. Mr Kearney sent his oldest daughter, Kathleen, to a convent like the one her mother attended, and he paid for her to study music at the Royal Irish Academy of Music. He regularly takes his family to nice seaside resorts in Skerries, Howth, or Greystones during the summer.

The Kearneys' marriage is a prime example of wealthy people making their marriages work in the interest of mutual social success: although Mrs Kearney has sacrificed romance to marry her husband, she receives an elevated social status and a comfortable lifestyle while securing the same for her daughters. However, the differences between Mrs Kearney's life and Kathleen's illuminate the shifting expectations of women from the time Mrs Kearney was young to the time in which "A Mother" takes place: unlike her mother, Kathleen is able to receive an advanced education in music, one that sets her up for a potential career and not just a marriage. This discrepancy causes a subtle tension in the story as Mrs Kearney sees her daughter living a life she might have lived had she only been born later. Finally, the fact that Mrs Kearney likes to talk about her vacations suggests that she is invested in shaping other people's impressions of her as a happy, prosperous woman with a successful family.

Once the Irish Revival became popular, Mrs Kearney decided to "take advantage of her daughter's name," Kathleen, and have her learn to speak and write to her friends in Irish. When Mr Kearney and his family attend Sunday mass at the pro-Cathedral, a temporary cathedral in Dublin, people wait for the Kearneys outside the church to gossip about music and Irish Nationalism. Kathleen Kearney is well-known in Dublin for being musically gifted, kind, and "a believer" in the revival of the Irish language.

Mrs Kearney observes that Kathleen shares her name with a traditional Irish heroine, Kathleen ni Houlihan, and by branding her daughter as a Nationalist woman and artist, she takes advantage of the comparison between the two in order to establish a reputation for her daughter. Mrs Kearney's proactive attitude towards her daughter's career reveals her social ambitions for her family as well as her desire to give her daughter the life she couldn't have. By micromanaging Kathleen's abilities and successes, Mrs Kearney ends up being a part of her daughter's musical career even though she could not have one of her own. However, her attitude towards Nationalism is not at all related to the actual aims of the movement. Irish Nationalism, the push for the Irish people to gain political and cultural freedom from their English colonizers, had a long history of failed rebellions by the time "A Mother" takes place. By participating in the Irish Revival, a renewed interest in Ireland's unique Gaelic and Celtic precolonial cultures, the Kearneys take part in Nationalism in the least politically radical way possible. Moreover, they essentially use the Nationalist movement for personal gain, taking advantage of the political moment to try to gain higher status in Dublin.

Mrs Kearney, pleased with Kathleen's fame, is not surprised when Mr Holohan approaches her to ask if Kathleen would be the piano accompanist for a series of four concerts his Society will host in the Antient Concert Rooms, a public meeting-hall in Dublin. Mrs Kearney invites him into her drawing-room, offers him wine and "the silver biscuit barrel," and works with him to set a contract for Kathleen so that she will receive **eight guineas** for her performance.

By offering Mr Holohan the silver biscuit barrel, Mrs Kearney asserts her class superiority over him. Ultimately, the eight-guinea contract she convinces Mr Holohan to sign benefits her much more than it benefits him, particularly since the guinea coin was out of circulation at the time the story takes place. Guineas thus became the primary monetary unit for wealthy people's business transactions. Drawing up the contract in guineas makes Mrs Kearney appear more aristocratic than she is and gestures towards her sense of paralysis: she cannot let go of the outdated social systems of the past.

Because Mr Holohan is inexperienced in event planning, Mrs Kearney helps him write the bills for the concert and order the performers. With her "tact," she decides which "**artistes**" should go in what order and how the bills advertise them, putting some performers' names in "capitals" and others in "small type." She balances comedic performers with serious singers and makes sure the audience will stay entertained by putting "doubtful" performers between sure audience favorites. Mr Holohan asks for her opinion nearly every day throughout the planning process, and she is always friendly and thoughtful—and keeps giving Mr Holohan plenty of wine.

The word "artistes"—a French word she would have learned at her upper-class school—appears in "A Mother" to signal that Mrs Kearney is much wealthier than the people around her and that her expectations of the concerts are much higher than their likely reality. However, it often turns out to be an ironic description, since the "artistes" themselves don't measure up to Mrs Kearney's expectations. Moreover, by speaking French throughout the story and not Irish (the language of the Irish Nationalist movement), Mrs Kearney reveals where her loyalties lie: with the wealthy Dubliners, not with those fighting for freedom. When she takes over concert planning, Mrs Kearney leverages what little power she has over Mr Holohan: by playing the hostess, she is able to use her femininity to influence him to do whatever she wants. However, Joyce will reveal how this influence only works to a certain extent.

Encouraged by how well the planning is going, Mrs Kearney goes out and buys lace dress trim from an expensive fabric shop in Dublin to add to Kathleen's performing dress. Although she knows how expensive it is, she believes it is worth it. Then, she buys a dozen two-shilling tickets to give to friends who "could not be trusted to come otherwise." She thinks of everything and, as a result, "everything that was to be done was done."

The expense Mrs Kearney goes to in order to ensure the concerts' success demonstrates how far she is willing to go to increase her family's social status and give her daughter the career Mrs Kearney couldn't have. However, her work is only for her family's success, not the success of the Nationalist message or the performers in general, something that will pose problems for her going forward.

The four concerts are scheduled for Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, but when Mrs Kearney and Kathleen arrive at the venue on Wednesday night, Mrs Kearney is not impressed with what she sees. A few young, underdressed stewards idle in the vestibule, and when Mrs Kearney looks down the hall, she realizes why: not enough people have shown up. While at first Mrs Kearney wonders if she is too early, it is almost eight o'clock.

When the concert is sparsely attended, Mrs Kearney gets the first hint that the concerts will not live up to her high expectations. Once again, the Nationalist movement seems unable to galvanize enough attention to make an impact, even with Mrs Kearney's help and investment.

Backstage in the dressing-room, Mrs Kearney meets the secretary of the *Eire Abu* Society, Mr Fitzpatrick, a small man with a "white vacant face," a **brown** hat perched "carelessly" on his head, and a "flat" Dublin accent. As he speaks to her, he gnaws on one of the ends of the concert program. Mr Holohan comes in every so often with reports from the box office, and Mr Fitzpatrick appears to "bear disappointments lightly."

Mr Fitzpatrick's brown hat, like Mr Kearney's brown beard, signals the decay Joyce saw in Dublin. His brown hat and "vacant" face hint at his moral emptiness, his carelessness, and, finally, his apparent lack of investment in the Nationalist cause. Joyce's description of Mr Fitzpatrick, particularly the brown detail, casts him as Mr Kearney's opposite: Mr Kearney is too serious about the things that keep the Irish people subjugated like the Catholic Church, and Mr Fitzpatrick doesn't care enough about the movement that could help set the Irish people free. Neither one is of much use to the cause.

As Mr Holohan pops in and out, reporting box office numbers to Mr Fitzpatrick, the "**artistes**" talk nervously amongst themselves. At almost half past eight, the few people waiting in the hall ask for the performance to begin, and in response, Mr Fitzpatrick smiles "vacantly" at the room and declares that he supposes they had better get started. Mrs Kearney again notes his accent's flatness and glares at him before asking Kathleen if she is ready to perform.

The word "artistes" appears to remind the reader that the performers at the concert are of a much lower caliber than Mrs Kearney expected. Moreover, Mr Fitzpatrick's delay in starting the concert gives the reader further hints into why the Nationalist movement is gaining cultural popularity but losing political traction: leaders like Mr Fitzpatrick are simply not that concerned about the movement's success. The detail about Mr Fitzpatrick's accent highlights the wealth difference between Fitzpatrick and Mrs Kearney: his "flat" Dublin accent is different from Mrs Kearney's more upper-class Irish accent, and the fact that Mrs Kearney zeroes in on his accent suggests that she looks down on him.

When she has the opportunity, Mrs Kearney pulls Mr Holohan to the side and asks him why the turnout is so low. Mr Holohan replies that he isn't sure, but he figures that the Committee must have made a mistake when they decided on four concerts, since four seem to be too many. Mrs Kearney tells Mr Holohan that the "**artistes**" performing are not good, and Mr Holohan agrees. He tells her that the Committee has decided to let the first three concerts be mediocre and save all the talent for the final Saturday night show.

Mr Holohan's inexperience becomes even more evident as he tries to explain the situation to Mrs Kearney, and his explanation suggests that the entire Committee is similarly unprepared to organize four nights of concerts—and, by extension, are completely unprepared to organize "victory" for Ireland. In fact, when they cut their losses and plan on a better turnout for the final concert, they mimic what the Irish Nationalist rebellions had done for centuries: give up and leave it up to someone else to try. Mrs Kearney also actually speaks the word "artistes" out loud to Mr Holohan backstage, flaunting her status and making her stand out among the lower-class Irish Nationalists.

Once Mr Holohan finishes explaining, Mrs Kearney says nothing in reply and, after watching the disappointing concert go on—and the crowd thin out—she begins to regret spending so much money and making such an effort on the series. Something about the concert doesn't seem right to her, and she particularly doesn't care for Mr Fitzpatrick's "vacant" smile. She holds her tongue until the end of the concert, and everyone goes home just before ten.

Mrs Kearney starts to realize how ineffective the Society is, but doesn't cause a stir just yet since Mr Holohan continues making promises to her and since Kathleen is still supposed to be paid for her performances. By keeping mostly quiet about her concerns, she once again sacrifices her true feelings for possible personal gain.

Compared to the Wednesday concert, the Thursday concert is much better attended. However, when Mrs Kearney looks at the crowd, she can see that it is "filled with paper"—full of people who have been admitted to the theater for free. The audience behaves poorly throughout the evening. Nevertheless, Mr Fitzpatrick appears to be having a good time, talking and laughing with friends occasionally, completely unaware of Mrs Kearney glaring at him, irritated with his behavior.

Once again, Mrs Kearney imposes her upper-class expectations on the concert, looking down on the lower-class audience for not behaving as if they were wealthy theater-goers. And since Mr Fitzpatrick joins in, Mrs Kearney looks down on him even more. While the audience's behavior shows that they do not seem to care about the cause of Irish freedom, Mr Fitzpatrick's conduct makes the strongest case for the Nationalist movement's stagnation: when he takes advantage of the concert's rowdy environment, Joyce invites the reader to consider how he (and others like him) might take advantage of the Nationalist movement as well.

During the Thursday evening concert, Mrs Kearney learns that the Friday concert will be cancelled, and the Committee will do everything in its power to make Saturday's show a full house. As soon as she learns about the Committee's plans, she goes looking for Mr Holohan. She stops him while he is limping over to a young woman to bring her lemonade and asks him if it is true that the Friday concert will be cancelled. He tells her that it is true, and Mrs Kearney insists that the cancellation shouldn't affect Kathleen's contract. Mr Holohan, who seems to be in a hurry, tells Mrs Kearney that she ought to talk to Mr Fitzpatrick. Feeling increasingly worried, Mrs Kearney flags down Mr Fitzpatrick.

Mr Holohan's limp reappears at the same time that Mrs Kearney learns that the Friday concert will be cancelled, emphasizing how hobbled the Nationalist movement is, particularly by its incompetent leaders like Mr Holohan and Fitzpatrick and by wealthy opportunists like Mrs Kearney. Mrs Kearney's stubbornness (her form of "paralysis") starts to come into play as she refuses to adjust her expectations to the changing circumstances, instead insisting that Kathleen still be paid in full despite the concerts' box office failures. However, the reader can also see how Mrs Kearney's wealth can only take her so far, as Mr Holohan continually evades her questions—suggesting she has less power in public than she has in her home.

Once Mrs Kearney gets Mr Fitzpatrick's attention, she reminds him that Kathleen has signed a contract for four concerts and, "of course," she ought to receive the full payment regardless of whether all four concerts happen. However, Mr Fitzpatrick does not seem to understand the problem or be able to solve it. He tells Mrs Kearney that he will present the issue to the Committee, and Mrs Kearney begins to flush with anger. She holds herself back from mocking Mr Fitzpatrick's accent and asking who the "*Cometty*" is because it would not be "ladylike," so she holds her tongue.

Like Mr Holohan, Mr Fitzpatrick is evasive and dismissive when Mrs Kearney comes to him with questions. His ignorance about the actual workings of her contract with the Committee exposes yet more problems with the Nationalist society's organization and communication. Mrs Kearney's desire to mock Mr Fitzpatrick's accent is a classist reminder that she considers herself above him and the other Irish people. But the detail that Mrs Kearney attempts to stay "ladylike" in her public interactions with him invites the reader to question whether he would be as dismissive of a man's concerns about a contract and reminds the reader that Mrs Kearney walks a fine line to maintain her reputation.

On Friday morning, groups of little boys are sent out to distribute handbills for the Saturday concert, and "puffs" advertising the concert appear in the evening paper. The advertising somewhat reassures Mrs Kearney, but she still tells her husband about her worries. Mr Kearney listens to her and says that he thinks it would be better if he went to the Saturday concert with her, and Mrs Kearney agrees. She respects him the same way she respects other "large, secure and fixed" things like "the General Post Office," and although she knows that he does not possess many talents, she can appreciate "his abstract value as a male."

When Mrs Kearney turns to her husband for help, she continues in her efforts to enhance her family's reputation and brings in someone with more power than herself: a wealthy man. Her description of her husband confirms his status as an immovable relic of the past, and her dismissal of his actual abilities relative to his "abstract value" as a man in public highlights how, despite her many actual talents, she still cannot command the same respect in public that her husband does.


On the night of the Saturday concert, Mrs Kearney, Mr Kearney, and Kathleen arrive together 45 minutes before the beginning of the show. Unluckily, it is a rainy night. Once the Kearneys arrive, Mrs Kearney puts her husband in charge of Kathleen's music and clothes and she goes to look for Mr Holohan or Mr Fitzpatrick. But when she can't find either of them, she asks the stewards if they know where any of the Committee members are, and "after a great deal of trouble," one of the stewards brings her "a little woman," Miss Beirne.

The weather matches the dour tone of the concertgoers and Society members, and as Mrs Kearney attempts to make contact with just one of the Committee members, the Society once again reveals how disorganized and ineffectual they are when none of the Society members seem to be in attendance until Miss Beirne shows up.

Mrs Kearney explains to Miss Beirne that she wants to see one of the Committee secretaries, and Miss Beirne replies that she expects them to arrive at any minute and asks if she can do anything for her. Mrs Kearney looks closely at Miss Beirne's "oldish face" which is "screwed into an expression of trustfulness and enthusiasm," and Mrs Kearney tells her no.

Like Mr Holohan and Mr Fitzpatrick, Miss Beirne is not able to help Mrs Kearney get any answers. The detail that she must "screw" her face into looking trustworthy and enthusiastic suggests that Miss Beirne knows that her Society is not particularly legitimate or effective.

Miss Beirne hopes that they will have a good house for the Saturday concert. Looking out at the rain, however, the "melancholy of the wet street" erases all the "trustfulness and enthusiasm" from her "twisted" face. She sighs and says, "Ah, well! We did our best, the dear knows," and Mrs Kearney has to report back to the dressing-room as the "**artistes**" begin to arrive at the theater.

Miss Beirne doesn't seem particularly surprised that the concert is a failure, and the detail that the Society did their "best" suggests that they really aren't capable of more than what they accomplished with the concert series—another partial explanation for the stagnation of the Irish Nationalist movement. As Mrs Kearney maneuvers backstage, the word "artistes" appears again, emphasizing the contrast between Mrs Kearney and her surroundings and deepening the irony around the concerts' failure.



The bass, Mr Duggan, has already arrived backstage. He is a thin man with a "scattered" moustache who, despite only being a hall porter's son, practiced his singing relentlessly "until he had become a first-rate *artiste*." Once, he appeared as the king in the opera *Maritana* at the Queen's Theatre when the original performer became sick. While he sang well and the audience loved him, he "marred" the impression he made by absentmindedly wiping his nose with his hand. He is a quiet, "unassuming" man who says "*yous*" so quietly that no one notices and drinks milk to preserve his voice.

The description of Mr Duggan demonstrates the difficulty people from lower classes than Mrs Kearney have in making names for themselves. Despite his real talent, his manners make him less appealing to wealthy audiences. His lower-class Dublin slang, "yous," betrays his class background, and Joyce's depiction of him makes him more sympathetic than many other characters in the story. However, the detail that he drinks milk to protect his voice makes him seem just as pathetic as the other performers since milk isn't a helpful thing to drink for a singing voice.

The second tenor, Mr Bell, has also already arrived. He is a small, blond man who competes for prizes every year at the Feis Ceoil, an Irish music festival. In his fourth year of competition, he won a bronze medal. He is anxious-tempered and envious of other tenors, and when he meets Mr Duggan, he makes sure Mr Duggan knows how difficult concerts are for him before laughing and shaking his hand.

Mr Bell has high ambitions, but his actual talent does not match his aims. Joyce's description of his pathetic attempts to gain success mirror Mrs Kearney's efforts to get more money—only Mr Bell seems less charming. Joyce himself was a talented tenor who competed at the Feis Ceoil and disappointed himself when he only won a bronze medal, so Mr Bell's character may be partly based on his own failure to impress.

Mrs Kearney passes by the bass and the tenor and peeks out into the audience from backstage. The seats are quickly filling up. Backtracking, she has a private conversation with Mr Kearney, which appears to be about Kathleen since they both keep looking at her while she speaks to Miss Healy, the contralto for the concert who is also their friend.

Mrs Kearney's backstage machinations set the stage for the conflict between herself and the Committee to come to a head.

When a pale woman no one has ever seen before arrives, the other women watch her and note the old blue dress on her thin body. Someone says that she is the soprano, Madam Glynn, and Kathleen asks Miss Healy "where did they dig her up" since she has never heard of her. In response, Miss Healy smiles, and Mr Holohan enters the room. When Kathleen and Miss Healy ask Mr Holohan who the woman is, he tells them that she is from London. Madam Glynn stands by herself in the corner of the room, looking around nervously as the shadows conceal her shabby dress from view but "revengefully" highlight how thin she is.

Madam Glynn, the English presence amidst a festival celebrating Irish culture, seems to intrude upon the Nationalist society's concert and immediately stands out. Her corpselike appearance reminds the reader of the decay that comes from colonization, the same colonization that the Society can't seem to effectively work against, especially since they book an English singer.

When the much classier first tenor and baritone arrive, Mrs Kearney brings Kathleen over to them and tries to be friendly. But as she talks, she keeps an eye on Mr Holohan limping around backstage. As soon as she can, she asks to talk to him. In private, she asks him when Kathleen will be paid her **eight guineas**, but he keeps dodging her questions and telling her that he doesn't know and that she should speak to Mr Fitzpatrick. Mrs Kearney insists that he fulfill the contract and leaves, returning to the dressing-room angry and flushed.

Mrs Kearney setting Kathleen up with the higher-class baritone and first tenor emphasizes how her status-seeking behavior extends to her daughter's personal life. And as she watches Mr Holohan like a predator, her gaze makes him appear relatively helpless. However, once she gets ahold of him, he continues to evade her questions, continuing the Committee's ineffectiveness in the face of challenges. Mrs Kearney's mounting anger threatens to make her break out of her "ladylike" politeness and reveal how she actually feels.

In the dressing room, a reporter from the *Freeman* (a Nationalist newspaper) and Mr O'Madden Burke are talking with Miss Healy and the baritone. The reporter, Mr Hendrick, says that he can't wait around for the concert to start because he has to report on a lecture from an American priest. But he never really intended to stay because he doesn't like concerts. Since Miss Healy obviously has a crush on him, he regrets that he has to leave, but he tells Mr Holohan that Burke will write the report and he will ensure it is published. Holohan invites him for a drink before he goes. They walk into a faraway room to drink, and in the room, they find Burke, a charismatic and well-respected older man, already drinking.

Joyce's descriptions of the reporters reveal that even more people who are supposed to care about Nationalism don't really seem to—yet more apathy that keeps the movement from taking hold more effectively in Ireland. Moreover, Mr Holohan drinking with the reporters reveals the corruption within the Society: although the audience and the performers don't enjoy the experience, the Committee members seem to be enjoying behind-the-scenes perks.

Back in the dressing-room, Mrs Kearney speaks so intensely to Mr Kearney that he asks her to lower her voice, and although Mr Bell is ready to perform, Kathleen has not given him the signal to go on. While the audience gets rowdy waiting for the concert to start, the Kearneys all speak together and Mr Bell grows increasingly nervous that everyone will think he is late. Mr Holohan and Mr O'Madden Burke enter and Holohan and Mrs Kearney argue about payment. Mrs Kearney stops Kathleen from playing until she gets her **eight guineas**. Mr Holohan tries to appeal to her and Kathleen to think of the audience, but Kathleen keeps quiet and stares at her new shoes because the conflict is "not her fault."

As Mrs Kearney continues her quest for payment and social advancement, she ends up halting the concert in its tracks, turning her individual stubbornness into total paralysis for the audience, performers, and Committee members. Kathleen remains passive, staring at her shoes to avoid getting embroiled in the conflict, taking a backseat in it as much as she does in everything else in the story so far.

Mr Holohan rushes out, and in the tense silence, Miss Healy asks the baritone if he has seen Pat Campbell, a famous actress who is in town this week. The performers all wait uncomfortably, occasionally looking at Mrs Kearney. Mr Holohan returns with Mr Fitzpatrick, who hands Mrs Kearney some money and tells her that she will get the other half at intermission. But Mrs Kearney tells him that he is four shillings short. Despite this, Kathleen tells Mr Bell to start, and they walk out together to begin the concert.

When Miss Healy asks the baritone if he has seen Pat Campbell, the detail signals to the reader that the poor turnout is in part because someone particularly famous is in town—yet more poor planning on the part of the Committee. As Mrs Kearney gets part of the money she wants from Mr Fitzpatrick, she still does not relent since he does not give her half of her payment. However, his miscount makes more sense in light of the fact that since the guinea was out of circulation, the value of the guinea in other banknotes—namely, shillings and pounds—fluctuated for quite some time before settling down. When Kathleen tells Mr Bell to start the first number despite the fact that she hasn't been paid completely, though, she breaks free from her paralysis. Ignoring her mother's demands suggests that she and a younger generation of Dubliners might be able to forge their own path out of stagnation. But since Joyce does not provide the reader with any insight into Kathleen's thoughts, her reasoning behind her defiance remains a mystery.

While the first part of the concert is successful, Madam Glynn sings *Killarney*, an Irish standard, "in a bodiless gasping voice," and the audience in the cheap seats makes fun of her old-fashioned singing intonation that she thinks makes her singing more elegant. Kathleen plays well, but backstage, a group of people, including Miss Beirne, Mr Holohan, and Mr Fitzpatrick, all gossip about the "scandalous" nature of Mrs Kearney's insistence upon payment, and Mr O'Madden Burke states that Kathleen's musical career is finished in Dublin. Altogether, the stewards and secretaries decide that she should receive no more payment.

Madam Glynn, the Englishwoman, continues to appear corpselike while trying to sing an Irish song, evoking colonization's impact on Ireland through her performance. She, too, attempts to seem high-class. But her operatic intonations only sound ridiculous to the crowd, who subtly resist the English influence in Ireland by laughing at her. As the factions argue backstage and O'Madden Burke declares Kathleen's career over based on her mother's actions, Joyce emphasizes how Mrs Kearney's actions have negatively affected her daughter—ultimately, men still get to make the final pronouncement on artists in Dublin.

In a different backstage corner, Mrs Kearney, Mr Kearney, and a small crowd all gossip about how the Committee has treated her after she spent so much money and effort on the concert series. She thinks that the Committee has misjudged her and wouldn't dare to treat her like this if she were a man. She determines that she will "make Dublin ring" if her daughter doesn't receive full pay. Though she will feel bad for the "**artistes**," it is the only thing to do. She tries to appeal to the second tenor and Miss Healy, and they both agree with her—although Miss Healy really is not on her side and just doesn't want to make things awkward since she is friends with the Kearneys.

As the Kearneys talk in their own corner, Mrs Kearney once again blends her privilege as a wealthy person with her disadvantages as a woman. However, Joyce sways the reader against her by interjecting the word "artistes" into Mrs Kearney's conversation and describing how Mrs Kearney leverages her social power over the younger Mrs Healy to take her side.

During intermission, Mr Fitzpatrick and Mr Holohan tell Mrs Kearney that they will pay her after the Committee meeting on Tuesday, but if Kathleen doesn't play the second half of the concert, they will consider the contract broken and pay nothing. Mrs Kearney and Mr Holohan both can't believe how the other has treated them, and Mrs Kearney gets so angry she looks like she might hit someone. She makes fun of Mr Holohan, mimicking his voice, and Mr Holohan tells her that he thought she was a lady and walks away.

Mrs Kearney and the Committee members reach a stalemate in their efforts to take advantage of one another, once again letting the Irish Nationalist cause take a backseat to money and interpersonal conflict. But when Mrs Kearney mocks Mr Holohan and he pronounces her unladylike, his word is final. Ultimately, he leverages his power as a man over her in public, humiliating her for a relatively tame infraction and ruining her reputation.

After her outburst, everyone disapproves of Mrs Kearney's behavior and sides with the Committee's choice. As she argues with Kathleen and Mr Kearney, waiting for the secretaries to talk to her again, Mrs Healy agrees to play the accompaniments for the second half of the concert. When the baritone and his accompanist pass by Mrs Kearney to take the stage, she gets even angrier. Once the music starts to play, she grabs her daughter and orders her husband to call a cab.

Her social ambitions ruined, Mrs Kearney keeps fighting with her family over the disrespect, but Joyce does not give the reader insight into their discussion. As they argue, Mr Holohan sets about finding a replacement for Kathleen, revealing how expendable the Kearneys were to him all along.

Mr Kearney exits and Mrs Kearney escorts Kathleen out. On her way out the door, Mrs Kearney looks at Mr Holohan and tells him that she isn't done with him. But he responds that he is done with her. Kathleen "meekly" follows her mother out, and Mr Holohan angrily paces, sarcastically saying, "O, she's a nice lady!" and Mr O'Madden Burke tells him he did the right thing.

Still not having learned her lesson about arguing in public or gotten the respect she wants, Mrs Kearney tries to keep fighting even as she exits with her family, but Mr Holohan stops her. As he does so, Joyce implies that there is nothing she can do to rehabilitate her reputation, and no one ends up looking good by the end of the argument. Neither upper-class Irish culture nor Irish Nationalism, it appears, is in a healthy state.

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