

Parnell in “The Boarding House”

“He is dead. Our uncrowned King is dead... He fell, as fall the mighty ones, Nobly undaunted to the last” (Joyce 114-115). The king referred to is Charles Stewart Parnell, who was not a king, but an Irish politician in the nineteenth century. James Joyce deeply admired him and wrote those lines as part of a poem dedicated to Parnell. This essay takes a further look into Parnell’s influence on James Joyce, specifically in the short story “The Boarding House” by Joyce, published in Dublin, Ireland in 1914. Robert M Adams asserted that “the image of this magnetic, inflexible man is celebrated somewhere in each of his books” (Adams 17). Another scholar, David Pierce, claims that “*Dubliners* constitutes Joyce’s judgement of Ireland in the wake of Parnell.” (Pierce 140). Many scholars assert that Charles Stewart Parnell greatly influenced Joyce’s work, but none apply this to “The Boarding House.” I assert that this story models Joyce’s admiration for Parnell and creates Mrs. Mooney as his foil.

“The Boarding House” takes place in Dublin, Ireland and tells of a love affair. Polly Mooney and Bob Doran pursue a relationship that goes a little too far. Mrs. Mooney, Polly’s mother, watches the relationship until she judges it time to intervene. Throughout the story Joyce uses several legal terms, and Mrs. Mooney takes on the role of judge. To investigate the relationship, Mrs. Mooney interviews Polly and Doran. Both lovers confess to the affair – Polly to her mother and Doran to his priest. In the end of the story, Doran and Polly receive the sentence of marriage. This story resembles a court case, as a result it makes a statement concerning the Irish government.

Parnell led the Irish Parliamentary Party during Joyce’s childhood. Joyce’s father greatly admired the man, and that admiration wore off onto James Joyce. During this time in Ireland’s history, the people and government were struggling. Together with Michael Davitt, Parnell

created the Land League, which was “an organization for linking the parliamentary with the popular struggle; its immediate aim was to better the lot of the Irish peasant” (Adams 15). The Land League is a small part of Parnell’s contribution to bettering the lives of the Irish people, but it helps to capture the essence of his career. During Ireland’s great struggles, he fought for the people. However, the people did not fight for him. Parnell fell from power due to his affiliation with a divorce. Dublin did not stand with this man, and his political career ended. As David Pierce phrased it, “in the fall of Parnell [Joyce] had a compelling example of how the Irish people turned on their leaders in history and betrayed them” (Pierce 67). As a leader in the Irish delegation, Parnell attempted to lead the people to a better life. However, when he needed the support of the people, they did not support him. Much can be said of Parnell and Joyce’s admiration for him, for now, the information provided here suffices to understand Parnell’s role in “The Boarding House.”

The first indication of Parnell in this story appears when one views this story as a court case. In the court case Polly and Doran are on trial. Polly and Doran face the accusation of defying religious laws and societal norms. Both parties confess to their sins, but in very different ways. Polly’s is conspicuously placed in the text as a song she sings: “*I’m a...naughty girl. You needn’t sham: You know I am.*” (Joyce 51). In singing this song, Polly confesses that she is guilty. She admits that she is a “naughty girl.” According to Ulin “there are clear similarities between the full song and Polly and Doran’s nightly rendezvous” (Ulin 275). By singing this song, Polly’s song confesses her part in the love affair. As contrast to Polly’s confession in a song, Doran’s confession is long and painful. In his admission, which was a literal confession to a priest, “the priest had drawn out every ridiculous detail of the affair” (Joyce 53). Doran’s confession brought him “acute pain” and “magnified his sin” (Joyce 53). While Polly’s

confession appears lighthearted, Doran's admission does not come easily. In this court case, the accusation of sin comes from society and religion because these are the groups they make their confessions to. Society brought the couple to trial, and Mrs. Mooney plays the role of judge.

To understand this story as a court case, Mrs. Mooney plays the key role. Mrs. Mooney is the judge. The description of Mrs. Mooney gives her the characteristics of a judge. The text describes Mrs. Mooney as a "shrewd judge," "a determined woman," and "a big imposing woman" (Joyce 49-50). Mrs. Mooney shares the same characteristics of a judge, and she carries the same power. An example of Mrs. Mooney's power appears in the symbolism of the cleaver. As a butcher's daughter and the wife of a butcher, Mrs. Mooney was familiar with the tools of the trade, especially the cleaver. Cleaver's specifically are mentioned many times throughout the text, they symbolize power, and Mrs. Mooney's cleaver takes on the same role as a judge's gavel. In the beginning of the story, Mr. Mooney "went for [Mrs. Mooney] with the cleaver...after that they lived apart" (Joyce 49). Initially, Mr. Mooney held the power, but Mrs. Mooney took the power for herself, and along with that she figuratively took the cleaver. During the 'trial' later in the story, the narrator states that "she dealt with moral problems as a cleaver deals with meat" (Joyce 51). This quote presents Mrs. Mooney with the cleaver as well as dealing with "moral problems" as the form of authority. Mrs. Mooney holds the power, therefore she holds the symbol of that power, the cleaver. Viewing Mrs. Mooney as the judge in the court case opens the symbolism of Parnell in the story.

There are many words and phrases used in the story that depict the imagery of a court case. The words "case" and "reparation" repeat several times. One scholar spoke of the use of the word reparation in "The Boarding House" in these words: "In a legal sense, reparation repairs damage to person or property, and Mrs. Mooney plays both of those secular trumps when she

dangles her daughter as a sexual lure" (Siedel 51). This scholar recognizes the legal connotation of reparation as well as Mrs. Mooney taking on power of position. In reference to Doran, Mrs. Mooney asks herself: "What reparation would he make?" (Joyce 52). This shows the same thought process of a judge thinking through a court case. Following that same thought, Mrs. Mooney tells herself: "There must be reparation made in such cases." (Joyce 52). This quote uses the words reparation and case, which plays into this story as a court case. As the judge, Mrs. Mooney decided "only one reparation could make up for the loss of her daughter's honour: marriage." (Joyce 53). This is the final decision, their punishment is marriage. Several other words and phrases throughout the text echo that of a court case, words and phrases such as: hard case, sheriff's man, shrewd judge, reconstruct the interview, suspected, honour, pleaded, confession, loophole, and remain free. The use of these words and phrases displayed all throughout the text reveal this text as a political statement.

In "The Boarding House" Mrs. Mooney symbolizes Parnell. Both stand as political figures, hold power, and fight for what they believe to be right. Parnell made his stage in The English House of Commons, and Mrs. Mooney's power reigned over her boarding house. In this way, the boarding house in the story represents the English House of Commons. According to Adams, "Parnell resolved to make the role of the Irish delegation in the English House one of deliberate, systematic obstruction" (Adams 16). As Parnell stood in the English House, he took control and demanded to be heard. These same characteristics are present in Mrs. Mooney. She receives the description of "a determined woman" (Joyce 49). The same terms used to describe Parnell, "deliberate" and "systematic" can apply to Mrs. Mooney in her approach to the Polly and Doran case. Another interesting aspect of Parnell's tactics include his effort to "[bring] the flow of legislation to a standstill" (Joyce 16). In effect, Parnell fought to create a paralysis in the

English House. This standstill served an ultimate purpose that would open the way for change. Joyce made it very clear that paralysis appears in every one of the *Dubliners* stories. Paralysis in the *Dubliners* does not come with a hope of change as Parnell's did; Paralysis in the *Dubliners* points out the flaws of the Irish people and their refusal to change. In "The Boarding House," paralysis does not come until the end of the court case. Mrs. Mooney fought for the same end goal as Parnell, but with different intentions. As the form of political power, Mrs. Mooney represents Parnell, however, she plays the role of his counterpart.

A close look at the story reveals Mrs. Mooney as Parnell's foil. Mrs. Mooney resembles Parnell, but she uses his good qualities to perpetuate the wrongdoings of the Irish people. In the story, Mrs. Mooney receives a separation from Mr. Mooney. A footnote in the Norton Critical Edition informs us that: "Roman Catholics were forbidden to divorce, but were able to request a formal separation from the Church" (Joyce 49). Therefore, Mrs. Mooney did not receive a divorce from her husband in order to keep with her religious standards. In opposition to that, Parnell lost his position of power due to his affiliation with a divorce. Mrs. Mooney lived in accordance with the religious expectations of the time, so she kept her power. In effect, this makes the statement that while Parnell fought for the good in Ireland, the leaders that were able to hold their power did not. This story gives Mrs. Mooney the appearance of Parnell, but this version of Parnell kept with the religious standards and did not fight for the better of the country. Mrs. Mooney represents what Parnell could have been, had he kept with religious expectations. The power Mrs. Mooney holds, she uses to force marriage and create paralysis. While Parnell and Mrs. Mooney resemble each other in their political tactics, Mrs. Mooney represents Parnell's foil.

Ultimately, this story tells the tale of Parnell's foil. While "The Boarding House" appears to be a story of a brothel, it truly tells of The English House of Commons and the politicians that work there. Polly and Doran signify the Irish people. Mrs. Mooney stands as Parnell's counterpart. In the end, Ireland betrayed Parnell. In opposition to that, Mrs. Mooney maintains her power. The people of Ireland punish themselves with the leaders they choose. A few more lines from the poem "The Death of Parnell" go as follows: "They had their way: they laid him low... One grief – the memory of Parnell." (Joyce 115). Joyce mourned the loss of Parnell, and his work reflects this sadness. "The Boarding House" shows Joyce's disgust in the Irish society for the loss of Parnell.

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