

The Exchange of Facades as a Social Business

The expectations for social behavior paralyze the actions of many of individuals within that society. Within Joyce's vision of Dublin and its inhabitants, however, it is those who treat these expectations as tools to exploit this business of social interaction-- through the false occupation of the niche socially constructed for them-- that reap the benefits of this exchange of formalities. In his story, "The Boarding House," James Joyce rewards his characters who are fully conscious of the role they are supposed to occupy and use that role to their advantage by manipulating its social implications. Through his writing, Joyce rewards both Polly's and Mrs. Mooney's profound grasp and exploitation of the power in the inherent gendering of society enabling them both to construct scenarios conducive to the wielding of this power and to the performance of anticipated female injuries to capitalize in the business of domestic interpersonal relations. Joyce rewards them by allowing them to "win" the goal that they seek – "reparation" (60). He also paints a picture on the opposite side of the spectrum; characters who do not abide by the societal importance of facades and appearances –such as Mr. Mooney—become financially and socially ruined. It is this adherence or divergence from the societal expectations dictating how individuals should act to achieve their goals financially, domestically, and socially that determines an individual's success within this exchange of appearances that is Joyce's social economy.

To emerge victorious in the social economy that Joyce reconstructs on the page, individuals are constantly weighing their position within the stratification of this business venture versus their competitors. In "The Boarding House," Mrs. Mooney carefully calculates the odds of her victory, "She was sure she would win. (...) she was an outraged mother (...) He was thirty-four or thirty-five years of age, so that youth could not be pleaded as his excuse;"

(Joyce 59). Within the context of the developing drama between her daughter –Polly—and Mr. Doran-- before she has even met Mr. Doran about the matter-- yet Mrs. Mooney already refers to her impending talk with him as one of conflict where there is a definite “win(ner)” and loser. She takes time to evaluate the social weight and sympathetic value of what each competitor comes to the table with. She lists the potential spots of exploitation within each individual's role to play in the story. Mrs. Mooney capitalizes on her role of wounded and “outraged mother” despite the fact that she knew of the affair practically since the beginning, yet watched in “persistent silence” until the violation and defamation of her daughter’s reputation occurred (Joyce 58). By doing this, Mrs. Mooney acts as a main contributor to this scandal. She allows the situation to continue until it gets to the point of no return for the party –Mr. Doran—that opposes her because she knows that Mr. Doran has nothing to bargain with. He is “thirty-four or thirty-five” and society says that he should have known better and therefore, does not warrant sympathy or pity in society’s eyes unlike her own role and that of her daughter. Through conjuring a scenario that she knows to yield her the public’s sympathy –a scenario in which she plays the role of the “outraged mother”—Mrs. Mooney is able to manipulate the cards each side of this exchange is dealt and ensure that the public’s sympathies are with her by portraying the role of horrified and concerned mother that societal standards demand of her.

A similarly feigned wounding is demanded of Polly by societal standards. She runs up to Mr. Doran’s room in tears, offers the expected melodramatic response of “put(ting) an end to herself,” and he tenders his socially mandated condolence (Joyce 62). They both are falsely projecting the emotional response that social expectations dictate they display, but it is Polly’s confidence in and consciousness of this role she performs as the wounded maiden—manipulating societal sympathies-- that allow her to keep her desperation to the performance only. This

element of production is further emphasized when Polly is alone and she returns to her calm, collected, and motivated state, “She waited patiently, almost cheerfully, without alarm, her memories gradually giving place to hopes and visions of the future” (64). The same panic that occurs the page before—as Joyce details the thought processes of Mr. Doran—do not occur within Polly’s mind. Both the mandated sympathies of society that seek to protect the defenseless maiden she feigns to be and the power that Mrs. Mooney wields through her role as the “outraged mother” demand that “reparation(s)” be made. Counting this to her advantage, Polly’s awareness of her leverage over Mr. Doran gives her the confidence to relax. She takes her time to casually “dip the end of a towel” in some water to touch up her eyes and fix her hair, which demonstrates that she lacks the concern and desperation as Mr. Doran while also reinforcing the ever-present consideration that Polly has regarding her appearance to society. Additionally, Polly conceives “visions of the future” as if a future as a wife holds a certain projected profit in her eyes through its fulfillment of the social expectations of a woman of her age. She approaches her relationship with Mr. Doran as a business venture which she is meant to profit from by means of a secured future. Polly waits patiently and expectantly of a profitable outcome because she has completed her performance flawlessly and knows that the sympathies of society when she returns to the public eye—once again inhabiting the role of a young girl being taken advantage of-- agree heavily with her and not Mr. Doran.

Unlike Polly and her mother, however, Mr. Mooney does not use the role he is meant to occupy within society to his social and economic advantage. By operating outside the economic system of appearances, he becomes both socially and financially ruined. This ruin is visible in the demise of his business, “By fighting his wife in the presence of customers and by buying bad meat he ruined his business” (Joyce 56). Mr. Mooney violates the barrier established between

public and private by bringing domestic squabbles into the public eye. Mrs. Mooney does not fight *with* her husband, but instead Mr. Mooney “fight(s) his wife.” In this description, he is the antagonist and the violation of the public rules and roles falls on his, “*he ruined his business.*” On the other hand, Mrs. Mooney remains relatively unscathed by and blameless for this debacle because she performs the role of the victim as society demands her to. Joyce also stresses the importance of pretense by listing Mr. Mooney’s fighting with his wife as the reason for failure before “bad meat.” As a butcher, Mr. Mooney fails in function because his wares are unsafe for public consumption. It is his behavior within his shop, however, -- which has nothing to do with the quality of his wares—that Joyce establishes as the primary reason for his failure. The mention of his wares being expired appears almost as an additional or extraneous fact interjected at the end of the explanation of failure. Appearance within the society Joyce regenerates on the page carries more weight than substance. Additionally, as a result of not abiding by the rules of appearance, Mr. Mooney loses not only his business, but his reputation and identity. After his shop closes, he is no longer allowed to see his daughter or even be referred to by name, only as the “disreputable sheriff’s man” (Joyce 57). Society rejects his former position as proprietor and father and strips him of his name. He becomes the possession of another man and no longer maintains an identity unto himself. The only mark of identification or individuality arises in his imposed description as “disreputable,” which is a damning description especially in lieu of a proper name. By operating outside the societal system by not assuming the role that society demands of him, Mr. Mooney becomes impoverished and deprived of all social standing, means to individuality, and power within that society.

The range of actions of characters-- such as Mr. and Mrs. Mooney and Polly--portrayed within society are limited by the expectations and rules that that society establishes. Although

Joyce maintains these limitations within his portrayal of Dublin society, he also demonstrates a means to acquire power and success through the manipulation of these rules meant to limit and confine. In his short story, “The Boarding House,” Joyce emphasizes the victory that lies inherent in the comprehension and exploitation of these seemingly strict social expectations. Characters that are able to operate with the economy of appearances within Dublin—such as Mrs. Mooney and Polly—emerge victorious by acquiring their desire outcomes. Through these two women, Joyce illustrates a successful manipulation of this system through the exploitation of loopholes with the system—such as the use of insincerity and facades. Conversely, Joyce uses the character of Mr. Mooney to demonstrate the complete ruin and expulsion from society that accompanies the operation outside the realm of the socially approved. Although Joyce establishes a dichotomous economy within society of winners—those who operate within the rules—and losers—those who operate outside the system—both seem to be ultimately losers in society’s eyes because even the winners—such as Mrs. Mooney or “The Madam” (Joyce 57)—suffer a form of societal chastisement for their calculated actions. As Joyce perceives the limitations of human life within society, there can be no true victors.