



## **Marriage as a Trap in Joyce's "The Boarding House"**

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### **Abstract**

This research article examines and analyzes the institution of 'marriage' in James Joyce's "The Boarding House" as a socially imposed contract, designed to secure economic stability and public respectability rather than personal fulfillment. This study addresses the critical gap in Joyce critiques that often underplays how economic and reputational imperatives shape marital arrangements in the story. Situated within the socio-cultural fabric of early twentieth-century Dublin, marriage emerges here as both a moral expectation and a mechanism of social control. Drawing on feminist and sociological perspectives articulated by Margot Norris and Harry Stone, this analysis foregrounds how Mrs. Mooney, the boarding-house owner, manipulates the romantic involvement between her daughter, Polly, and Mr. Doran, to orchestrate a marriage serving her own interests. The findings of the study reveal how Joyce depicts marriage not as a romantic or liberating institution but as a transactional, coercive practice that limits the autonomy of both women and men. By portraying key scenes like Mrs. Mooney's calculated confrontation and Mr. Doran's reluctant acquiescence, this article demonstrates Joyce's subtle critique of institutionalized marriage. Thus, this study explores the contemporary relevance of Joyce's critique, especially in ongoing debates about consent, personal freedom, and social expectations in intimate relationships. This study employs a qualitative research design, interpretive

approach, and textual analysis method to explore marriage not as a romantic or liberating institution but as a restrictive, coercive trap for women constrained by social and economic pressures in early twentieth-century Dublin.

**Keywords:** Gender roles, institutionalized marriage, moral expectations, personal agency, social entrapment

### Introduction

This research examines James Joyce's "The Boarding House", one of the stories in *Dubliners*, to uncover a nuanced critique of marriage as a socially coercive trap rather than a romantic union in Dublin. Set in early twentieth-century Dublin, this story portrays how economic insecurity, Catholic morality, and rigid gender expectations converge to make marriage an institutional contract rather than a voluntary union. This environment leaves individuals with little room for personal choice; reputational anxiety and the threat of scandal force compliance with social norms. Within this setting, Joyce constructs the story as a microcosm of Dublin's intersecting systems of morality, commerce, and surveillance, a "little hive of domesticity" (Joyce, 1914/2000, p.57). This narrative situates marriage within the socio-economic and moral frameworks, which acts as a mechanism of control for women who face limited options within patriarchal structures.

Joyce's narrative transforms the boarding house into a microcosm of these forces: a space where privacy, morality, and commerce intersect. He analyzes Mrs. Mooney who "dealt with moral problems as a cleaver deals with meat" (Joyce, 1914/2000, p.69). It signals a tone of calculated pragmatism rather than romance. From the outset the story does not portray marriage as an idealized union but as a transaction embedded in power relations. Building on this context, the present study analyses how the story presents marriage not as a voluntary or romantic partnership but as a coercive arrangement designed to secure social standing and economic security. Mrs. Mooney's daughter, Polly's flirtations become strategic rather than purely romantic; and Mr. Doran, the respectable boarder "longed to leave for another country" (Joyce, 1914/2000, p.72) but coerces into marriage. Together they enact a drama in which marriage operates as a negotiated settlement of power, money, and reputation rather than a freely chosen partnership. A web of societal expectations catches them and compels them to confirm and sacrifice their personal desires.

To demonstrate the above dynamic, this research employs a theoretical framework that integrates feminist and sociological perspectives. On the one hand, Norris's (2003) concept of "adaptive performance" (p.58) provides a lens for understanding Polly's actions within the constraints of limited female autonomy. On the other hand, Foucault's (1995) theory of disciplinary power (p.195) frames Mrs. Mooney's manipulation as a form of social surveillance and control. The above perspectives situate Joyce's story within broader questions about how institutional forces regulate intimacy and how gender, consent, and freedom negotiate under such conditions. These foregrounding tensions contribute to Joyce scholarship that demonstrates how the story critiques not only Dublin's "paralysis" but also

the coercive underpinnings of marriage issues that remain relevant to contemporary debates about gender equity and personal agency. The following review of literature explores the literary works of scholars who make a study of this story from different perspectives. It will help this researcher to draw a research gap that will justify this research as appropriate to this study.

### Review of Literature

Numerous scholars analyze "The Boarding House" from different perspectives like class, gender, and moral codes in early twentieth-century Dublin. Henke (1990) explores the story as "the commodification of marriage," (p.102). Mrs. Mooney exploits her daughter's sexuality as a form of "economic capital" (p.102), to secure both financial stability and respectability. It demonstrates how marriage in Joyce's Dublin could operate as a transactional arrangement rather than a romantic union. Deane (1986) situates the story within Joyce's recurring theme of "moral paralysis," (p.25). Mr. Doran's consent to marriage stems from fear of social disgrace and ecclesiastical judgment rather than genuine desire. Walzl (1961) further analyzes it as "the coercive force of public opinion in Joyce's Dublin is both invisible and inescapable," (p.346). He explores how social pressure operates as an unspoken but decisive factor in personal choices.

Literary scholars analyze the story from gendered perspectives too. For instance, Norris (2003) examines the dynamics between Polly and Mrs. Mooney and finds the daughter's apparent compliance as "an adaptive performance" (p.58). It suggests a society that curtails female autonomy. Norris (2003) further finds Mrs. Mooney's manipulation as "female agency carved out of patriarchal structures" (p.58) rather than pure villainy. Similarly, Mahaffey (1988) portrays Mrs. Mooney as "a pragmatic survivor" (p.77) who understands how to maneuver within the constraints of her social and economic position. Ellmann (1982) introduces the role of religion in the story to reinforce marriage as a trap. He analyzes Mr. Doran as a "devout Catholic and a man of stable employment" (p.213). Mr. Doran knows well that the Church's view on premarital relationships leaves him no honorable escape. This religious backdrop magnifies the sense of inevitability surrounding his decision.

In terms of narrative technique, Kenner (1987) finds Joyce's strategic omissions particularly the absence of direct dialogue between Mr. Doran and Mrs. Mooney, which compel readers to infer the coercive negotiations at work (p.89). This aligns Stone's (1963) observation that Joyce "trusts the unsaid to carry the weight of moral judgment" (p.51). Such narrative restraint mirrors the societal pressures that operate subtly but decisively in determining the outcome. Sociological approaches to the story view the boarding house itself as a microcosm of Dublin society. In this regards, Jackson and McGinley (1993) examine the house, which "functions as a liminal space where public respectability and

private desire collide, often to the detriment of individual freedom" (p.134). This setting becomes the stage upon which Joyce dramatizes the entrapment of marriage.

The above critical perspectives establish the story as a complex interplay of social coercion, gender politics, religious morality, and narrative craft. While critics analyze the story through the lenses of gender politics, religious morality, narrative craft, and socio-economic dynamics, these studies often isolate one dimension at a time. What remains underexplored so far, how these forces like social coercion, economic necessity, gendered power relations, and religious morality interact to construct marriage as an inescapable trap. This research aims to bridge this gap by offering an integrated reading that examines marriage in Joyce's Dublin not merely as a personal contract but as a metaphor for systemic entrapment.

Traditional literature often portrays marriage as the natural culmination of love and companionship. However, Joyce examines it as a form of entrapment shaped by social, religious, and economic forces. In early twentieth-century Dublin, marriage frequently operates less as a personal choice and more as a response to the fear of scandal, loss of respectability, and economic insecurity. Although critics like Margot Norris and Harry Stone examine *Dubliners*' themes of paralysis and gender relations, they tend to emphasize Joyce's general critique of Irish society rather than the concrete strategies by which Mrs. Mooney manipulates the courtship of Polly and Mr. Doran to secure a marriage. This leaves a critical gap in understanding the story's specific mechanisms, the sequence of actions, manipulations, and social pressures through which Joyce critiques marriage as an institution. By isolating these mechanisms, this study addresses whether marriage in such contexts functions as a stabilizing social institution or as a tool of control and subjugation. This tension between the romanticized ideal and the coercive reality of marriage forms the central problem this research seeks to address.

### Research Questions

- a. How does the story depict marriage as a form of entrapment within the socio-religious and economic context of early twentieth-century Dublin?
- b. What narrative strategies and character dynamics does Joyce employ to reveal the coercive forces behind the marriage between Polly Mooney and Mr. Doran?

### Objectives

- a. To analyze the social, religious, and economic pressures that transform marriage into a form of entrapment in Joyce's "The Boarding House".
- b. To examine Joyce's use of characterization, irony, and narrative perspective in exposing the manipulative and coercive elements surrounding the marriage plot.

### Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in textual analysis. It examines how Joyce constructs marriage as a form of entrapment through characterization, narrative technique, and socio-cultural context. This research employs close reading as its primary method, analyzing selected passages for their thematic, linguistic, and structural features. It pays special attention to the interplay between explicit narrative details and implicit suggestions, particularly in moments where Joyce uses omission, free indirect discourse, and irony to convey coercive pressures. In addition to close reading, this study draws on feminist and sociological theoretical perspectives to frame its analysis. It employs feminist literary theory, drawing on Norris's (2003) notion of "adaptive performance" (p.58) that provides a lens for understanding Polly's actions within the constraints of limited female autonomy. Similarly, it employs Foucault's theory of disciplinary power (1995) to inform the reading of Mrs. Mooney's manipulation as a form of social surveillance and control. These frameworks situate Joyce's text within larger discourses on gender, power, and institutional regulation. "The Boarding House" from *Dubliners* remains the primary source of study. Secondary sources include scholarly articles, critical essays, and annotated editions that examine themes such as gender, social norms, Catholic morality, and economic dependence in Joyce's work. Together, these sources supply the historical and theoretical grounding necessary to interpret the marriage plot as a socio-cultural trap rather than a purely personal or romantic union.

### Reviews and Discussion

This study analyzes why Joyce's (2000) critique of marriage in the story matters in both the historical and contemporary contexts. By situating the marriage plot within the intersecting frameworks of gendered power, socio-economic constraints, and Catholic morality, he exposes the coercive underpinnings of marriage in early twentieth-century Dublin. While previous critics examine these aspects separately, this research synthesizes them to reveal how individual agency governs the personal relationships in the story less than by external pressures of respectability, survival, and public judgment. The significance of this analysis lies in its capacity to broaden the discussion of *Dubliners* beyond its frequently cited theme of "paralysis", to include a more nuanced understanding of institutional entrapment. Joyce subverts the traditional literary ideal of marriage as a culmination of love and companionship, presenting it instead as a vehicle for social control. By framing marriage as a trap, the story invites readers to scrutinize the ways in which gender, consent, and freedom intersect with social and economic power.

In addition, this research underscores the continuing relevance of Joyce's critique. Contemporary debates about marriage, gender equity, and economic dependency still echo the tensions portrayed in the story. Bringing together literary analysis and socio-cultural critique, this study not only enriches Joyce's scholarship but also contributes to broader conversations in literary criticism about how institutional authority shapes private lives and

restricts personal autonomy. This study confines its analysis to James Joyce's (1914/2000) "The Boarding House", from his collection *Dubliners*, focusing specifically on the theme of marriage as a form of entrapment. It examines the story in relation to its socio-historical and cultural background. However, the findings of the story do not intend to represent all depictions of marriage within Joyce's broader works or Irish literature of the early twentieth century. The research relies primarily on textual analysis and published critical interpretations, without incorporating archival research, historical case studies, or oral histories that might provide additional empirical perspectives. Furthermore, feminist and socio-historical critical frameworks shape the interpretation, which, while valuable for demonstrating gender dynamics and societal pressures, may not fully encompass alternative readings such as psychoanalytic or purely stylistic analyses. The following textual analyses explore how marriage becomes a trap in the story.

### **Mrs. Mooney as the Architect of Entrapment**

Joyce's (2000) "The Boarding House" introduces Mrs. Mooney as a shrewd manipulator. She as a "determined" woman "married her father's foreman and opened a butcher's shop" (p.69) before separating from her abusive husband. This early characterization sets the foundation for her calculated nature: a woman who survives not by surrender but by orchestration. She engineers her daughter's marriage through a calculated social maneuver. Her entrapment scheme begins with her keen awareness of social codes. Joyce (2000) postulates, "she watched the pair and kept her own counsel" (p.71) as Polly grew closer to Mr. Doran. It demonstrates Mooney's patient surveillance and deliberate secrecy. Marcus (2005) quotes the following lines to justify her strategy:

There had been no open complicity between mother and daughter, no open understanding, but though people in the house began to talk of the affair, still Mrs. Mooney did not intervene. Polly began to grow a little strange in her manner, and the young man was evidently perturbed. At last, when she judged it to be the right moment, Mrs. Mooney intervened. (p.145)

Mrs. Mooney makes up her mind to refrain from intervening until circumstances favour her. She attempts to resolve the complexities of family relationships with quiet observation. She emphasizes intervening at the right moment for an effective result than acting immediately. She stays silent initially as a strategic choice to better understand the situation before taking action. Hence, her actions reflect the value of patience, discretion, and thoughtful intervention in managing sensitive personal or family matters. Jackson (1993) finds how Mrs. Mooney "reads the social codes of Dublin not as constraints, but as tools for leverage" (p.154). Her silence does not prove passivity but the stillness of a hunter waiting for the trap to spring.

The act of Mrs. Mooney turns the point of the story when she finds "time to put an end to it" (Joyce, 2000, p.72). Her judicial action signals her readiness to act. She summons Mr. Doran for "a little chat" (p.72), knowing the weight of such a conversation in the rigid

moral climate of Catholic Dublin. Norris (2003) examines, she "creates a scenario in which male honor is inseparable from female confinement" (p.89). By confronting him, she forces him to choose between public disgrace and compliance.

Mrs. Mooney manipulates her daughter's role in the plot. The story portrays Polly initially as playful and "singing at the piano" (Joyce, 2000, p.72). She sings with young men in the boarding house. However, she becomes a silent accomplice as Mrs. Mooney instructs her not to cry but to maintain a poised demeanor before her mother's meeting with Mr. Doran. Walzl (1961) makes a study of how Mrs. Mooney's manipulation remains "less about maternal protection and more about securing a profitable settlement that merges morality with economy" (p.228). Indeed, her scheme promises both, financial stability for Polly and social reinforcement for herself as a respectable landlady.

This story portrays Mrs. Mooney's architectural control at its end. Her sitting at the breakfast table and "smiling" (Joyce, 2000, p.73) gives an image of her triumphs at her confrontation. Every step, from observation, to silence, to confrontation, has been part of a deliberate blueprint for entrapment. Mrs. Mooney presents herself not merely as a participant in the events; she designs them. Her mastery of timing, manipulation of social codes, and strategic control over her daughter's interactions make her the true architect of entrapment in the story—a role that resonates in contemporary discussions of agency, gender, and power.

### **Mr. Doran's Moral Paralysis**

Mr. Doran's dilemma develops sequentially as he becomes increasingly ensnared in the web of moral and social expectations. When the narrative shifts to his perspective, Joyce (2000) presents him sitting in his room on Sunday morning, dreading the conversation with Mrs. Mooney. His mind turns first to the shame of having to "go down on his knees" (p.72) and confess to his priest, an act that he knows would mark him socially. This moment signals the first stage of paralysis, his fear of religious authority and the loss of moral standing. From there, Doran's thoughts move to the judgment of his employer, who might dismiss him if the scandal becomes public. Joyce (2000) examines, "he could not risk a scandal" (p.72) making clear that his personal conviction shapes his decision less than by the coercive power of Catholic morality and the rigid respectability of Dublin society. Deane (1993) finds, "Joyce often frames such moments to reveal moral paralysis" (p.25), where the character sees the possible escape but cannot grasp it.

"The Boarding House" employs free indirect discourses to draw the readers deep into Doran's private deliberations, where marriage emerges not as an act of love but as a calculated way to mitigate social and professional damage. Kenner (1987) explores how Joyce "trusts the unsaid to carry the weight of moral judgment" (p.89), and indeed, Doran never articulates any sense of affection for Polly—only the necessity of resolving the matter in a manner acceptable to the Church and his peers. The sequence of his thoughts moves



from fear of confessions to dread of social disgraces, to reluctant acceptance of marriages, charting his steady descents into a state where moral obligation replaces agency entirely.

### **Polly's Ambiguous Role**

Polly Mooney occupies an ambiguous position in "The Boarding House". The story introduces her as "a little perverse madonna" (Joyce, 2000, p.71) who sings with an artiste, "I'm a ... naughty girl / You needn't sham: / You know I am" (p.71). This early scene, before the central conflict emerges, plants the seed of her potential complicity. It hints early on at her possible involvement in the unfolding conflict. Norris (2003) examines her behavior as "an adaptive performance" (p.58) shaped by the limited agency available to women in early twentieth-century Dublin. In this view, Polly's flirtatiousness may not be necessarily manipulative, but rather a strategic expression of survival within a restricted economic and social framework.

As the boarding house's routine continues, the story introduces Polly gravitating toward Mr. Doran in increasingly intimate ways. Joyce (2000) adduces:

On nights when he came in very late it was she who armed up his dinner. He scarcely knew what he was eating, feeling her beside him alone, at night, in the sleeping house. And her thoughtfulness! If the night was anyway cold or wet or windy there was sure to be a little tumbler of punch ready for him. Perhaps they could be happy together." (p.72)

The above gestures, while outwardly signs of kindness, also serve to deepen the connection between Polly and Doran. The subtle intimacies and acts of kindness sustain relationships between the two lovers. Such moments create a possibility for happiness and connection despite underlying difficulties.

Polly's role becomes even murkier when Mrs. Mooney finally confronts Mr. Doran. Polly "cried and threw her arms around his neck" (Joyce, 2000, p.74). This emotional reaction of a distressed young woman occurs during a decisive conversation about marriage. It suggests a possible awareness of her persuasive effect. She threatens Doran, "she would put an end to herself" (p.74). She fears from her mother as well as from the society where she lives in, when their affairs become public. The morals of her family rest on Doran. She doubts whether he shows his consent of marriage with her, as Dublin society prioritizes wills of males ruling over females. Norris (2003) analyzes such moments that "invite dual readings, oscillating between helplessness and tactical self-presentation" (p.59). Such moments have two different interpretations: alternating between expressions of vulnerability and intentional efforts to control how one perceives.

### **Marriage as an Institutional Control**

In "The Boarding House", Mrs. Mooney maneuvers events so that marriage becomes a tool of social and moral control, particularly over Mr. Doran. The story unfolds in a sequential pattern that reveals her strategic role in orchestrating what Norris (2003) calls "a



moral entrapment masquerading as social propriety" (p.64). The opening section of the story establishes Mrs. Mooney's backstory — her separation from a violent, alcoholic husband, Mr. Mooney, "they lived apart. She went to the priest and got a separation from him, with care of the children." (qtd. in Marcus, 2005, p.144). She runs a boarding house, "set up a boarding house in Hardwicke street" (p.144). Joyce (2000) finds her managing it "successfully" and "always had an eye to business" (p.60). It signals her capacity of shrewd planning. This calculated approach lays the groundwork for her manipulation of Polly's romance.

Mrs. Mooney installs Polly in the boarding house to "keep things tidy" and to "entertain" the male boarders (Joyce, 2000, p.61). The euphemistic language hints at Mrs. Mooney's awareness of the potential for intimacy. Norris (2003) asserts, "The boarding house is staged as a trap — the proximity and domestic intimacy invite indiscretions which Mrs. Mooney can then convert into advantage" (p.65). When Polly involves with Mr. Doran, Mrs. Mooney does not intervene to stop their relationship; instead, she allows it to progress: "she watched the pair and kept her own counsel" (qtd. in Marcus, 2005, p.145). She wants to ensure that the situation reaches a point where marriage becomes the only socially acceptable resolution. She deliberately delays confrontation and chooses "the right moment" (Joyce, 2000, p.64) to speak to Mr. Doran. With her critical timing, by waiting until the relationship goes far enough to damage Polly's reputation, she leaves Mr. Doran with few options. Stone (1982) postulates, "Mrs. Mooney understands the moral code of Dublin society well enough to turn it into a form of coercion" (p.52). Mr. Doran, for his part, agonizes over the prospect of marriage, knowing his employer and the Church will judge him harshly if he refuses. "He longed to ascend through the roof and fly away" (Joyce, 2000, p.65). Yet societal expectations bind him, and Mrs. Mooney counts on this pressure. Her meeting with him at the end does not negotiate but reaches a foregone conclusion — an assertion of control through the institution of marriage.

By structuring the narrative in this order, from Mrs. Mooney's initial setup, to Polly's seduction, to the final confrontation; Joyce portrays marriage less as a romantic ideal than as an instrument of social discipline. Mrs. Mooney, acting as the "architect of entrapment," uses marriage to secure economic stability for Polly and herself, while reinforcing the gendered power structures of early 20th-century Dublin.

### **Surveillance and Public Shame: The Panoptic Power of Dublin Society**

A network of social surveillance reinforces the coercion in "The Boarding House". Mr. Doran's consultation with the priest confirms his "harsh reproving" (Joyce, 2000, p.58) and frames marriage as the only viable "loophole of reparation" (p.57). This demonstrates how religious and communal authorities converge to close off alternatives. Kiberd (1995) postulates, "Joyce's Dublin is a city governed by rigid social surveillance where personal freedoms are shackled by public decency and collective judgment" (p.147). Such

surveillance operates like a panoptic force, keeping individuals in line through the constant threat of exposure. Foucault's (1995) theory of disciplinary power explains how institutions like church, family, community, etc. function as mechanisms of observation and regulation (p.195). Mr. Doran senses "the eyes of Dublin" upon him (Joyce, 2000, p.59), and it compels him to feel so even without direct confrontation. Joyce thereby depicts marriage as an outcome less of private decision than of public enforcement. This dimension of the story demonstrates how internalized shame maintains social order as much as external rules.

### **Economic Pragmatism and the Transactional Nature of Marriage**

Joyce analyzes the economic logic behind the impending marriage. Mrs. Mooney calculates Mr. Doran's worth, thinking, "She knew he had a good screw for one thing and she suspected he had a bit of stuff put by" (Joyce, 2000, p.55). This line dispels any notion that the union rests on affection or compatibility. Instead, marriage appears as a financial arrangement designed to secure Polly's future and stabilize Mrs. Mooney's household reputation. Wasson (2014) examines how in such contexts women "often have to navigate patriarchal constraints by leveraging their limited agency within structures like marriage" (p.98). This economic pragmatism transforms intimacy into a transaction, making marriage a mechanism of survival rather than personal fulfillment. Joyce explores how economic necessity reinforces gendered power relations. By showing Mrs. Mooney's calculations, the story demystifies marriage's romantic veneer and reveals its underlying contractual nature. This aspect of the trap complements the psychological and social pressures already discussed.

### **Religious Morality and the "Loophole of Reparation"**

Religious discourse in the story adds another layer to the marriage trap. Mr. Doran's priest advises him to marry Polly as a "loophole of reparation" (Joyce, 2000, p.57). It frames the union as a moral obligation rather than a personal choice. This counsel reinforces the social expectation that marriage repairs sexual "transgressions" and preserves public decency. Eagleton (1975) analyzes how Catholic morality in Joyce's Dublin operates as a "tool of social control rather than moral improvement" (p.59). By placing the priest's advice at a pivotal moment, Joyce critiques the intertwining of church authority and social institutions. Religious morality thus functions not as genuine ethical guidance but as a mechanism to uphold societal order. This dynamic erodes individual autonomy and recasts marriage as punishment rather than partnership. Mr. Doran's reluctant submission becomes a case study in coerced consent. Joyce demonstrates how spiritual rhetoric can mask worldly power. It sets a system where religious and social pressures converge to limit freedom.

### **The Boarding House as Symbolic Space: Confinement and Entrapment**

The setting of the boarding house itself reinforces the theme of entrapment. Joyce (2000) introduces it as a "little hive of domesticity" (p.57), a metaphor that evokes both industrious order and claustrophobic confinement. As a semi-public space, it blurs the

boundaries between respectability and private desire, making secrecy impossible. Holland (1974) analyses how the boarding house "encapsulates the mechanisms of gossip, social control, and reputation management" that dominate Dublin life (p.74). This environment mirrors the larger social structures that constrain the characters' choices. Just as Mr. Doran feels watched by the city, the house's walls enclose him physically. The space thus operates as a microcosm of Dublin's moral and social architecture. It literalizes the trap that marriage represents metaphorically. By situating key scenes within this setting, Joyce amplifies the sense of inevitability surrounding the characters' decisions. The boarding house converges to a cage where from neither affection nor resistance can escape.

### Marriage as a Multifaceted Trap: Synthesis and Implications

Taken together, the elements like Mrs. Mooney's strategy, Mr. Doran's psychological conflict, social surveillance, economic calculation, religious morality, gendered ambiguity, and symbolic space construct marriage as a multifaceted trap. It ensnares not only women like Polly, whose futures barter for security, but also men like Mr. Doran, who suffers loss of autonomy through enforced conformity. Kiberd (1995) adduces, "Joyce's narrative unveils the oppressive social architecture of Dublin where personal agency is systematically curtailed" (p.147). By layering psychological tension, societal surveillance, and economic necessity, Joyce critiques the romantic ideal of marriage as a liberating or redemptive institution. Instead he expresses it as a mechanism of social control and survival. This synthesis broadens the familiar theme of paralysis in *Dubliners* into a more specific account of institutional entrapment. It also portrays the continuing relevance of Joyce's critique to contemporary discussions about gender, consent, and freedom. In this way, "The Boarding House" becomes not just a story about early twentieth-century Dublin but a lens for examining enduring structures of coercion.

### Conclusion

This study finds marriage not as an institution of romantic fulfillment, but as a calculated mechanism for securing social stability, often at the expense of individual agency. Through the calculated actions of Mrs. Mooney and the silent acquiescence of Mr. Doran, Joyce analyzes how societal pressures, moral expectations, and economic concerns transform marriage into a trap, one where personal choice overrides by the weight of communal judgment. The analysis of key scenes like from Mrs. Mooney's "patient" orchestration of events to the subdued resignation of Mr. Doran, demonstrate how the 'trap' stands not merely circumstantial but systemic, and roots in the social and moral codes of early twentieth-century Dublin. The significance of this story lies in its recognition, how Joyce's critique transcends its historical moment. The dynamics of coercion, strategic manipulation, and moral bargaining in marriage, which the story frames in a specific cultural and temporal setting, remain disturbingly relevant in the modern contexts. The issues of consent, social pressure, and gendered power imbalances continue to surface. Joyce exposes how society's system connects the personal relationships. He challenges readers to question

the romanticized view of marriage. He urges readers to see how economic needs, social reputation, and gender expectations still influence close relationships. Thus, this story endures as a potent literary mirror, reflecting both the specific realities of Joyce's Dublin and the broader, timeless tensions between individual freedom and institutional constraint. Future researchers can explore whether similar mechanisms of social and moral coercion operate in other stories in *Dubliners*, like "Eveline" or "A Little Cloud." They can analyze whether characters in them also manipulate events to limit others' choices. They can further draw the cross-character comparative studies like comparing Mrs. Mooney with other controlling female figures in early 20th-century literature, examining whether stories portray such women as villains, survivors, or both.

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