

“Clay” by James Joyce: Study Questions

1. Describe Maria. What important facts about her are revealed in the story? What are the dominant qualities of her character and personality, and what details of the narration suggest these qualities? What significance do you think her name might have?
2. What is the significance of the story’s title? What thematic meanings does it suggest to you?
3. A “barmbrack” is a kind of seasonal cake inside which the baker would traditionally hide a ring representing the imminent wedding of the person who ate that piece. What can we infer from Lizzie Fleming’s mention of the ring and from Maria’s reaction to her comment?
4. What does Maria’s trip on the Drumcondra tram reveal about her? Consider the significance of her interactions with the older gentleman and her lack of interaction with the younger gentlemen.
5. What happens in the Hallow Eve game when Maria plays? What does the reaction of the others in the room suggest, and what does Maria’s reaction suggest? What do you think is the significance of Maria’s second result? What does the second sentence of the next paragraph suggest? (“Soon they were all quite merry again and Mrs Donnelly said Maria would enter a convent before the year was out because she had got the prayer-book.”)
6. The words to the second verse of “I Dreamt that I Dwelt,” which Maria mistakenly leaves out when she repeats the first verse, are as follows:

*I dreamt that suitors besought my hand,
That knights upon bended knee,
And with vows no maiden heart could withstand
That they pledged their faith to me.
And I dreamt that one of that noble host
Came forth my hand to claim;
Yet I also dreamt, which charmed me most,
That you loved me still the same.*

What significance might her mistake have in terms of the themes of the story? Why do you think no one points out her mistake?

7. Consider Joe’s behavior in the story: making a special effort to be kind to Maria, crying after she sings the song. What do you think is the significance of this behavior—what connection might it have with the story’s themes?
8. What do you think is the point of the story?