

Sample writing assignment: The bleakness of “Clay.”

See the following sample assignment for an argument Joyce’s short story “Clay”—a story that, somewhat like “The Dead” (the focus of this module’s writing assignment) has been read in a couple of different ways.

As always, in your assignments, I will be looking for a clear argument, strong textual evidence, and a well-formatted and written response.

Please be sure to provide a Works Cited. This can be in any form you are most comfortable with (AP, MLA, Chicago, Oxford, etc.), but should make it clear what is being referred to and where that item can be found.

Please note: the 250-word limit (plus or minus 10%) applies only to the text of your argument. It does not include the works cited or the heading information.

Sample question: **“Clay” has been read as both a sympathetic account of an old woman’s outing, focused on the happiness it brings her, and a bleak take on the way she is treated.**

Which reading do you find more compelling?

A. Student

Writing Assignment, Module 8

“Clay” offers a bleak assessment of the way in which Maria is treated by her colleagues, strangers, and former employers. Maria might feel that she is loved by others, but the story shows this to be an illusion. Indeed, there is little sympathy in this story and the reader witnesses a series of snubs and jokes at Maria’s expense, rendering the story a bleak account of interpersonal relationships in Dublin.

The story is told from Maria’s perspective and we learn she believes everyone is “so fond” (64) of her. It soon becomes clear, however, that this is untrue. At the laundry where she works, the workers tease her that she will get the ring during Halloween festivities—suggesting that she will get married. This seems highly unlikely since Maria is old and can only laugh with “disappointed shyness” (65). A shopkeeper makes a similar joke, asking Maria if she wants to buy a “wedding cake” (66). She is obviously so unlikely to marry that it is an easy joke to make at Maria’s expense. It is at Joe’s house, however, that she is treated with the most contempt. First, the children play a nasty trick on her and then the family asks her to sing a song about being wealthy and in love—two things that Maria very definitely isn’t. When she makes a mistake and sings the first verse twice, Joe laughs so hard his eyes filled “with tears” (69). Maria might feel that this is because he was “very much moved” (69), but by this point the reader knows his response is driven not by sympathy but contempt. [270 words]

Works Cited.

James Joyce, *Dubliners* (New York: Dover Publications, 1991).