

The Girl I Left Behind – Language

The songs as a motif*

“Teedle-um-tum-tum – there was the tune again, going round my head” (219)

“Sometimes he whistled ‘Softly, softly, Turn the Key’, but usually it was ‘The Girl I Left Behind Me’ rendered at a brisk hornpipe-tempo.” (219)

At noon Mark Letter is “whistling [...] that sailors’ song ‘The Girl I Left Behind Me’.” (220)

“Teedle-um-tum-tum. Teedle-um . . .” (220)

“I heard suddenly [...] his tune again, a low swift hum.” (220-221)

“Through [his] teeth he whistled his tune. Yesterday, it had been ‘Softly, Softly, Turn the Key’, but today it was the other. (221)

“I recollected that Mr Letter had come in for his tea with his tie still dangling from his hand, his throat white under the open-neck shirt, and his ‘Teedle-um-tum-tum’ in his teeth.” (221)

Arriving home the narrator says to herself: “softly [...], softly turn the key.” (221)

“Teedle-um-tum-tum.’ – I told myself that I was giving way to neurosis.” (220)

“I was doing this to get rid of [...] that song in my brain swimming round like a damned goldfish.” (222)

“Teedle-um-tum-tum.’ – I caught myself humming the tune as I walked quickly up the sad side street to our office.” (222)

“Softly, softly, I said to myself as I turned the key of the outside door. Quickly, quickly, I ran up the stairs.” (222-223)

“The Girl I Left Behind” also known as “The Girl I Left Behind Me” is a long-standing popular folk tune. [...] In Ireland it was known as “The Rambling Labourer” and “The Spailpin Fanach” and was first published in Dublin in 1791. The earliest known version of the melody was printed about 1810 in Hime’s “Pocket Book for the German Flute of Violin” (Dublin, n. d.), vol. 3, p. 67, under the title “The Girl I left Behind Me; NLI.” (National Library of Ireland, Dublin)

It has many variations and verses. Here is one example:

All the dames of France are fond and free
And Flemish lips are really willing
Very soft the maids of Italy
And Spanish eyes are so thrilling

Still, although I bask beneath their smile,
Their charms will fail to bind me
And my heart falls back to Erin’s isle
To the girl I left behind me.

Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Girl_I_Left_Behind] (14 June 2009)

Mark Letter's tie as a motif*

Mr Letter often plays with his tie: "from his left hand would dangle his tie. He would gaze at this tie; it was his main object of contemplation." (221)

"Mr Letter had come in for his tea with his tie still dangling from his hand." (221)

"I was rather apprehensive lest I should find Mr Letter at the office, standing, just as I had last seen him, swinging his tie in his hand, beside my desk." (222)

"With a great joy I recognized [...] my body lying strangled on the floor." (223)

Foreshadowing the ending

"No one at the bus station took any notice of me. [...] That evening I felt particularly anonymous among the homegoers. Everyone looked right through me and even, it seemed, walked through me." (219)

On the bus "I stood on a man's foot, and said, 'Oh, sorry.' But he looked away without response, which depressed me. (220)

"I thought how nearly no one at all I was, since even the conductor had, in his rush, passed me by." (221)

"My landlady fussed over [the new guests], ignoring me." (222)

Flashback

Trying to find out what she might have forgotten she thinks about her day: "That morning I had arrived at the office ..." (220); "by noon ..." (220)

* One of the dominant ideas in a work of literature; a part of the main theme. It may consist of a character, a recurrent image or a verbal pattern.