

Assignment 4A

Write an analytical essay (900-1200 words) in which you analyse and interpret Mark Webb's short story "Jack O'Brian".

Part of your essay must focus on the social setting in the story. In addition, your essay must include an analysis of the style of writing in lines 16-35.

Your essay must include references to the short story.

Material: Mark Webb, "Jack O'Brian", 2018

Mark Webb Jack O'Brian

Trevor is blasting Thin Lizzy's version of *Whiskey in the Jar*¹. It's grey and cold but not pissing down so I can have a fag out of sight in the laneway behind our houses and listen to Trevor's tunes. He's the only one with a record player and good taste on our street. Ma says his da bought it 'cause Mr Walsh works on the ships and feels guilty for being away all the time. I think Trevor's lucky. He gets all the

5 good stuff without
the hassle of having his old man around. We only have the radio in our house and it's usually playing shite. I'm wearing long trousers for the first time this year so no more freezing legs, looking like a turkey's plucked arse. Mrs Walsh made them for me. She's great with a needle and thread and helps Ma out whenever she can. I asked her to give them a bit of a bell-bottom, to which she said:
10 "Absolutely not."

I can hear her shouting at Trevor to turn the music down. Don't see why. He livens the place up. Older 10 people always want a quiet house so they can hear themselves think. She's great and all but I don't think

15 Mrs Walsh will be mulling over *Finnegans Wake*² or anything. Without Trevor's music, Cherryfield Road is the most miserable, greyest, fucking hole in Dublin.

I have to go get Da from the pub in a minute, otherwise Ma says he'll stay there all night and not come home for his dinner. Like there would be any harm in that. I start sucking on one of those mints that burn
your nose and throat to hide my cigarette mouth and I'm off.

20 Boyle's pub is dark and dingy. The soles of my shoes stick to the floor and announce my arrival to the patrons and the publican.

"Ah look, it's Jack O'Brian, coming to take his da home for his dinner," says Michael, a bulbous-eyed, noisy little fecker³ who's friendly with Da and hasn't a good thing to say about anyone.

25 "Da, Michael" I say, and take a seat at the bar next to them to begin my wait.

"Me boy told me that Father Flanagan is giving you extra work after class. Said you'll be learning Ancient Greek. The brains on ya!" says Michael.

That only happened today, nosy bastard. He knows everything.

¹ *Thin Lizzy, Whiskey in the Jar*: the Irish rock band Thin Lizzy's version of the Irish folk song "Whiskey in the Jar" was a hit in 1973

² *Finnegans Wake*: an experimental novel by the Irish writer James Joyce (1882-1941)

³ fucker (Irish slang)

30 “They’re only short passages. Just trying to better myself.”
 “Much good it’ll do him, when he’s setting down pipes and unclogging toilets,” says Da, speaking for the first time since I came in the door. “He can recite Greek to pass the time of day, but the clients will think he’s away with the fairies.”

 The two of them start laughing. Fucking eejits. Belittling everyone to make out the dead end they find themselves in is a choice instead of a mistake. With their dirty shirts and dirty necks and filthy nails.

35 Cunts, I think to myself. [...]

 “Are you nearly ready to go. Da?” I say.
 “What’s for dinner, then?” says Da.
 “Roast beef, boiled vegetables and spuds,” I say.

40 “Jaysus, no rush to get back home, then. A packet of cheese and onion crisps and two more pints there, Seamus,” says Da.

 Four pints later we’re on our way home.
 Everything is louder and feels electric. The ground underneath our feet seems noisier to step on than usual. I say nothing and hope he says nothing. Silence is good. After a few pints God

45 knows what road his mind will take.
 We get into the house and it’s business as usual.

 “I’m just warming the food, Frank. Joe heard your footsteps and told me to put it on,” says Ma, smiling.

50 “Not ready yet, then? Don’t mind me. I’ve just been working all day and have to be up at the crack of dawn tomorrow,” Da says.
 “The meat turns to rubber if you heat it for too long. I want it to be nice for you,” says Ma, not quite meeting his eyes.

 “Ah sure, fuck it, we’ll wait. Joe, come ‘ere to your old man. You’re always looking out for me, aren’t ya? What do you want to be when you grow up?” says Da, putting Joe on his lap.

55 “A plumber like you. I’ll sort people’s houses out. And then I’ll have lunch at Bewley’s⁴ and order tea with little cubes of sugar on the side,” says Joe, delighted with all the attention he’s suddenly getting.

 “Silly boy, I don’t have lunch at Bewley’s every day. Do you know your brother is learning Ancient Greek? Do you know what job that’s good for?” says Da.

60 “What job?” says Joe, wide-eyed.
 “None,” says my father and makes a sound like he’s nearly choking himself laughing.
 “Actually you can use it in university, if you’re a professor. That’s a good job to have,” I say, looking at the floor.

 “Listen to you! ‘*Actually*’! You sound like a fucking fairy. Are you going to be one of those Trinity College⁵ heads? The cream of Dublin, thick and rich? Well, son, you’re missing one of the criteria there. You’re fucking thick but you sure as hell ain’t rich,” he says, and laughs at his own joke. Stupid fucker.

65 “Frank, he’s only a boy. They’re bound to be impressed by what they learn in school,” says Ma.
 I just look down and wait for it to pass. Hopefully Ma will serve dinner soon and he’ll fill that mouth of his that constantly needs to be doing something. Drinking or eating or talking shite.

70 “Jaysus, are you making the food from scratch, Nell? Plate up, woman, for fuck’s sake!” Da says.
 “Do you need any help, Ma?” I say, watching my mother do her usual trick of making herself smaller and smaller. One day she’ll make herself one with the wall and disappear.

 “Is cooking another thing Father Flanagan has taught you? Maybe you can bring him over to the house sometime and he can turn our water into wine,” he says, and belches, filling the front room with

⁴ *Bewley’s Grafton Street Café and Restaurant*: a famous café in Dublin

⁵ *Trinity College*: the University of Dublin

75 the smell of beer. "Don't be getting any ideas that you'll be going to college. You'll finish school and then you'll help put bread on the table. You'll work. There will be no stuffing your nose in a book."
I feel my whole body heating up until even the backs of my ears are burning.
"Maybe I can get a better job. Maybe I don't have to have muck under my fingernails and a filthy
80 stained collar. Any savage can fix a toilet, drink himself stupid, then come home and shout at his wife and children to make himself feel important!" I blurt out.

Time stops.

My mother speaks. "Jack, don't upset your father. Tell him you didn't mean it," she says, and walks over to Da's chair. She puts her hand lightly on his shoulder as if touching a wild animal she's afraid of. "Frank, he's just under a lot of pressure at school. He's tired."

85 Da shoves Joe off his knee and gets up, taking his belt out of its loops. His famous belt that always ends up joining his hands and his fists at the end of the night.

Ma takes Joe in her arms and carries him upstairs. There's no point trying to get between me and Da. It never works.

90 "You little fucking bastard. I put food on the table and clothes on your back. Who are you to judge me? A fucking nobody, that's who you are. Fucking nobody," he says. He keeps repeating himself, the boring bastard.

I get hit and shoved and punched but I don't make a sound. The belt burns the skin on my back. His right fist thuds onto my jaw and the pain spreads all the way to the other side of my face and the top of my head. The lashes of the belt get more and more frequent until I'm numb and they don't burn any
95 more. I know there will come a point when it stops, like it always does. And then there will be a time in the future when it starts again, like it always does. [...]

In the morning we warm up yesterday's food and have it for breakfast, then Joe and I set off for school. Father Flanagan is getting everyone to read passages of *The Odyssey*⁶ out loud. It's about this Greek king, Odysseus, who's very clever. He has to make his way back home from Troy to Ithaca when
100 the Trojan War is over. He keeps having to stop and spend ages on one island or another. I'm starting to think maybe Odysseus doesn't really want to get home. Maybe he shackled up with some bird on one of the Greek islands and this whole book is the fib he'll tell his annoying family when he finally gets home late, really late. Can't think of a better reason to write.

105 Suddenly I hear my name being called and realise all the rest of the lads are filing out and I've been caught by Father Flanagan mid-daydream.

"Are you OK, Jack? You look pale," says Father Flanagan with that awful gleam of pity in his eyes.

I give him a serious and silent nod of reassurance but he still looks like he pities me and out of nowhere the classroom goes blurry and fucking tears start streaming down my face.

110 "I wish he was dead. Father. I prayed all night that death would come and take him so the rest of us could breathe," I say.

"Those aren't good thoughts, Jack. Only God can decide what happens to people," says Father Flanagan. "I know. Father, I'm just giving him a few ideas," I say.

"Jack!"

"Sorry, Father."

115 "You have to focus on building your life. You could get a scholarship, Jack," he says.

"He won't let me go to university, Father. He wants me to work so we have another person earning," I say. "That's what the argument was about."

Father Flanagan looks at me and the pity spreads out over his whole face. Priests always have good Christian advice but it's not them that are being tormented.

120 Trevor is waiting outside the main school hall.

⁶ *The Odyssey*: an ancient Greek epic poem

"Are you OK?" he asks.

"Grand," I say.

"Want a cigarette?" he says.

"Of course I do," I say and we head towards the alley behind our houses. [...]

125 I open the door and there he is, with Ma and Joe next to him tending to his every need. I just want to go upstairs and sleep. I want to be on my own and pretend I'm not here. I want to dream myself away into another dimension, pretend I'm on a ship travelling the Aegean⁷, anchoring off the shores of the Lotus Eaters' island⁸. I'll eat an entire harvest's worth of the stuff and forget about manky⁹ Cherryfield Road.

130 "I'm going upstairs," I say, trying my best not to be noticed.

"Stay. Wait, Jack," says Ma. "Your da isn't well," and I notice he's lying back in a chair, with her supporting his head. He looks like he doesn't even have the strength to turn around and glare at me.

Time stops.

"What's wrong?" I say.

135 Joe's eyes are full of fears and questions he probably doesn't have the words for.

"His blood-pressure tablets. He forgot to renew his prescription," Ma says.

"Should we call the doctor?" I ask.

"Yes, but first I need you to run to the chemist and get some tablets for him. Now."

"It's on the other side of Crumlin¹⁰."

140 "Well, you'll need to go fast, then. Go, don't waste any time. Here, take this money," she says.

"Are you sure?" I say.

"What do you mean. 'Am I sure?' Of course I'm sure. Go quickly, now!" she shouts.

The door shuts behind me. The air feels different. Everything has a different light on it, a brighter light. I start making my way towards the chemist's. As I pass Trevor's house I see his bicycle in the driveway but decide not to ask for it. I'll walk. Fast. People always comment on how fast I walk everywhere.

145 My thoughts are racing a mile a minute.

It's fallen to me. How has it fallen to me?

I keep walking. The roads are empty. Everyone's at home having their dinner. It's that time of day.

150 I check my breast pocket to make sure I still have the money and I feel the two cigarettes Trevor gave me. He said they might help me think.

How can this be up to me?

There's another laneway just to the left of me. It'll get me to where I'm going but I'll also be hidden. I take a few steps down it, stop and light a cigarette. I'll go to the chemist but not before I've had a short break. Just to get over the shock. The first drag of the cigarette makes me light-headed.

155 His well-being depends on me now.

This is why old people always say life's a funny thing. All the times he hit me and called me a nobody. And now I'm the nobody he depends on. I'll get his fucking pills in my own time. Father Flanagan would disagree.

160 If God decides he wants to spare him, he can do that. At least then when he hits me I'll know I deserve to be punished. If not, he can stand at the Pearly Gates and when he's asked who did this to him he can say, "Nobody."

⁷ the sea between Greece and Turkey

⁸ the Lotus-Eaters' island: a stop on Odysseus' journey in the *Odyssey*

⁹ unpleasant

¹⁰ a Dublin suburb

I use the butt of the first cigarette to light the second one.

(2018)