

‘Small Things Like These’ by Claire Keegan

- The protagonist Bill Furlong is a hardworking coal merchant.
- Although he is not poor, Bill is constantly aware of the cost of supporting his wife and five daughters.
- While Bill has his own business, others are not so fortunate.
- Industries are letting people go and the dole queues in the town are getting longer.
- In rural areas, the situation is even worse.
- Emigration is rising, with those who can get to England or America doing so in the hope of making a better life for themselves.
- Those who remain are often plunged into destitution and hunger.
- When Bill travels around the locality delivering coal and logs on Christmas Eve, he notices how people are struggling and, in many cases, unable to pay for the delivery of fuel.
- On another occasion, he sees a ‘young schoolboy drinking the milk out of the cat’s bowl behind the priests house’.
- There is a general acceptance of the terrible poverty endured by those at the bottom of the social ladder.
- Bill, however, does not find it easy to ignore the inequality he sees when he is out on his rounds.
- His wife Eileen is more pragmatic, believing that it is the way of the world and focusing on her own family rather than the deprived children in the locality.
- She also reflects the viewpoint of many in the town: those who have little, or nothing have only themselves to blame.
- The community of New Ross is far from diverse and anyone different stands out.
- There is also a degree of separation between the remnants of Anglo- Irish society, represented by the Wilson’s, and the Catholic majority in the town.
- Because Mrs. Wilson was a protestant, she was not restricted by Church rules in the same way as the other character in the community.

- This allowed her to take Bill's mother when the convent laundry would have been the only other option for a single, pregnant young woman shunned by her family because of her condition.
- Unusually for a woman in the world of the text, Mrs. Wilson was independently wealthy and 'didn't seem to care much for what judgements others passed'.
- She treated Bill with kindness and, through her interest in him, Bill learned 'good Protestant habits' such as rising early and drinking little.
- Religion and social class are linked in the novel.
- The convent on the hill is described as a 'powerful-looking place' and indeed the religious orders play a vital role in maintaining the social hierarchy in the town.
- The nuns and priests live in a relative luxury and there is little indication that they engage in meaningful charity work, but instead reinforce the cruel inequalities and prejudice that exist in their community.
- The clergy are in a position of authority and power in the town.
- Bill is in an unusual social position. He came 'from nothing' or as some cruelly say, 'Less than nothing'.
- On the one hand, his illegitimacy is a reason for shame at the same time and in that place, but because Bill grew up in the Wilson house, he was exposed to a more elegant and refined way of life than most the 'finer, plainer things' he was used to as a child.
- Although those things were not his, they shaped his tastes and expectations.
- The combination of his illegitimacy and familiarity with the finer things of life means that Bill does not fit in as naturally and easily as others who were raised in the town and are clear about their place in society.
- Eileen makes unpleasant remarks about his parentage.
- Bill is marked by the attitudes of others in the community and has internalised their belief that he is not as good as those who are born to married parents.
- He is delighted that his own family is considered socially acceptable.
- The unfortunate girls in the convent laundry are regarded as the lowest of the low.

- Far from having sympathy for their situation, people blame them for their misfortunate.
- Predominantly patriarchal
- Womens work is housework and child- rearing, while the men earn money to provide for their families.
- Eileen is aware of the social restrictions imposed upon women because of their gender and their position in the community.
- Even the women in the novel internalise the misogyny that abounds in Ireland in the 1980s.
- Furlong has escaped the fate of so many other children born to unmarried mothers, thanks to the kindness of Mrs. Wilson.
- Bill worries that he is inadequate as a husband.
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