

The Deceit and Desire

The principal characters generally have identifiable voices, especially Arthur and Emma. The dialogue is not interchangeable across the whole cast. However, some supporting characters share a similarly formal, explanatory register, so the distinction is strongest at character level and weaker among certain institutional figures.

Arthur Delaney — the strongest voice

Arthur has the most developed and recognisable voice.

His dialogue combines:

- working-class Scots vocabulary and contractions;
- warmth and teasing within the family;
- blunt scepticism about religion and authority;
- poetic or sentimental language when emotionally exposed;
- sudden, short bursts of anger under pressure.

Early Arthur is domestic and lightly humorous:

“Aye, well that’s religion for ye.”

He can move naturally from that everyday tone into sincere emotional declarations about Mary and the children. His use of Burns-like romanticism gives him an unexpectedly lyrical dimension, while lines such as “They cannae be orphans if I’m here” distil his entire identity into simple, personal language. The final reprise of these phrases makes his voice memorable beyond the immediate scenes.

His grief also changes his rhythm. When relatively secure, he talks, jokes and reasons. When overwhelmed, his speech contracts into accusations or broken declarations:

“The bastard’s gone!”

“He’s taken them away!”

“What kindae God are ye?!”

Those lines could only credibly belong to Arthur at that stage of the story.

Voice score: 9/10

Emma Stirling — highly distinctive

Emma’s voice is almost Arthur’s opposite.

She speaks through:

- elevated and formal vocabulary;
- complete, controlled sentences;
- institutional and financial terminology;
- moral and religious justification;
- commands disguised as reasonable administration;
- an assumption that her opinion constitutes authority.

She rarely sounds conversational. Even when discussing children, she speaks of agreements, arrangements, residences, funds, training and placements. Her language turns human beings into components of an enterprise.

Typical Emma phrasing includes:

“I felt it was imperative...”

“It is something I have no inclination to perform.”

“It is a principle I am willing to contest.”

She frequently uses impersonal constructions—“it is,” “it shall,” “it was imperative”—which reduce emotional responsibility. She does not say, “I will not give Arthur his children.” She reframes her refusal as policy, principle or care.

Her religious language is also distinctive because it blends compassion with prejudice. She speaks of “poor, destitute children” and her “compassion,” while referring to Catholicism as “popish practices” and “the devices of the Roman priests.” That contradiction is embedded in the voice rather than merely stated by the plot.

When challenged, her language becomes shorter but remains absolute:

“I am.”

“I cannot say.”

“They are under my care and it shall remain that way.”

This tightening is effective. She loses some social polish without losing authority.

Voice score: 9/10

Arthur and Emma are clearly differentiated

Even without character names, it would usually be easy to tell them apart.

Arthur speaks from:

- personal experience;
- family;
- pain;
- pride;
- immediate physical reality.

Emma speaks from:

- systems;
- abstract principles;
- religion;
- administration;
- presumed superiority.

Arthur says, in effect:

These are my bairns.

Emma says, in effect:

These children are under my care.

That difference is the dramatic conflict expressed through language.

Mary Delaney — warm, practical and lightly teasing

Mary has a softer, more practical voice than Arthur. She usually speaks from immediate domestic reality:

- pregnancy;
- children;

- fatigue;
- family reconciliation;
- what needs to be done next.

She is less rhetorical than Arthur. His mind expands into religion, history and romance; Mary pulls matters back toward the household.

Her teasing response to his romantic language—

“Arthur Delaney! You’ve been reading Burns again.”

—gives their marriage an established, affectionate rhythm. She recognises his tendency toward romantic performance and punctures it without rejecting the sentiment.

Her voice is clear during the early family scenes, although her comparatively limited screen time means it is defined more through relationship chemistry than through a wide range of verbal habits.

Voice score: 7.5/10

Cecilia — compassionate, religious and quietly purposeful

Cecilia is distinct from Mary in function and temperament, although there is some overlap in warmth.

Her voice is:

- gentle;
- morally encouraging;
- more consciously religious;
- slightly more formal than Arthur’s community;
- inclined toward proverbial reassurance;
- practical beneath the spiritual language.

She says:

“A problem shared is a problem halved.”

and:

“Yet here I am.”

She then removes the whisky, gives Arthur money and directs him toward work. This is important: her language is comforting, but not passive. She pairs faith with action.

Later, she becomes more of an expositional conduit when explaining the legal campaign to Father Hannan. The content is necessary, but some of those longer lines sound more like information delivery than spontaneous Cecilia dialogue.

Voice score: 7/10

Helen Delaney — respectable, guarded and corrective

Helen has a recognisable older, socially established voice.

She tends to use:

- more formal vocabulary than Arthur;
- gentle admonishment;
- indirect self-defence;
- practical instruction;

- emotionally controlled observations.

She says:

“Fate is fickle.”

and later:

“The arthritis is unrelenting, which curtails my ventures outside.”

That formality distinguishes her from the more colloquial working-class characters, although it occasionally feels unusually polished for natural conversation.

Her central verbal pattern is correction. Arthur makes an emotional claim; Helen qualifies it, challenges it or tells him what he must do. She often occupies the position of the family elder who resists admitting fault directly but offers practical support.

Voice score: 7/10

Miss Guthrie — polite institutional persuasion

Miss Guthrie has a clear function, but a less singular voice.

She differs from Emma through tone:

- Emma commands.
- Miss Guthrie persuades.
- Emma assumes ownership.
- Miss Guthrie presents institutional intervention as help.
- Emma uses moral certainty.
- Miss Guthrie uses concern and reassurance.

Her most characteristic language is:

“There is no shame in asking for help.”

and:

“Would you deny them this?”

She guides Arthur toward the decision through apparently compassionate questions and promises.

The issue is that Miss Guthrie’s formal phrases can sometimes resemble Emma’s or the lawyers’ dialogue. “This is a grave situation” and “as a matter of urgency” communicate her role, but they do not reveal much private personality.

She is distinguishable by **method**, but not always by individual verbal texture.

Voice score: 6.5/10

Nellie Delaney — lively and teasing

Nellie has one of the clearest supporting voices.

She is:

- quick;
- cheeky;
- direct;
- observant;

- comfortable teasing family;
- more energetic than Mary or Helen.

Lines about Helen being a “cantankerous old biddie” and her playful exchanges with Luke establish a recognisable family wit.

She sounds younger and sharper than the other Delaney women. She could have slightly more dramatic material, but the dialogue she has is characterful.

Voice score: 7.5/10

Luke Boylan — generous, sociable and lightly comic

Luke is also distinct within his limited material. His voice combines:

- teasing charm;
- generosity;
- informal authority;
- reluctance to embarrass Arthur.

He does not give Arthur charity in solemn terms. He turns it into family banter and practical insistence. That prevents him from sounding like another generic benevolent supporting character.

Voice score: 7/10

James — appropriately resistant, but underdeveloped vocally

James has an emerging voice rather than a fully developed one.

He is:

- protective;
- wary;
- less persuaded by adult reassurance;
- old enough to remember home;
- inclined to answer Emma minimally.

His:

“Father, we dinnae need to go to any school.”

immediately differentiates him from Annie, whose concern is more emotionally direct:

“You won’t leave us?”

James’s resistance and silence in Canada help define him, but he could carry one or two additional recurring verbal traits—perhaps echoing Arthur’s scepticism or protective language—to strengthen the father-son continuity.

Voice score: 6.5/10

Annie and Robina

Annie has a simple, emotionally legible child’s voice. She expresses fear and need directly. Robina is too young and has too little dialogue to possess a strongly individual verbal identity.

That is not necessarily a problem. A four-year-old does not require an elaborate dialogue signature. Her dramatic identity comes more from vulnerability and behaviour.

Patricia Dishon — measured witness rather than dramatic speaker

Patricia's voice is deliberately different from the historical characters.

She speaks in:

- modern standard English;
- careful evidential phrasing;
- qualified claims;
- chronological explanation;
- restrained emotion.

Phrases such as:

"By all accounts..."

"So, the assumption is..."

"It was discovered..."

sound appropriate for a witness presenting researched family history rather than reliving direct memories.

Her emotional voice emerges only near the end, particularly when she explains the consolation she found in the descendants' names and finally says:

"Rest in peace Arthur."

That contrast works: restraint makes the final personal line more affecting.

Voice score: 7.5/10

Where voices blur

The main area of similarity is among:

- Miss Guthrie;
- Cecilia in explanatory scenes;
- Father Hannan;
- Ross Stewart;
- Grant Cunningham;
- Bernadette;
- the charity directors.

They often speak in polished, complete sentences that explain:

- legal status;
- moral positions;
- procedural developments;
- institutional facts.

For example, phrases such as:

- "Let procedures take their course."
- "This is a grave situation."
- "I will contact you in due course."
- "It is a challenge that tests our faith."

are appropriate, but several characters could exchange them without a dramatic change in identity.

This is partly caused by their roles: lawyers, priests and administrators naturally use formal language. The improvement would not be to give each a conspicuous catchphrase, but to vary **how they approach uncomfortable information**.

For example:

- Ross Stewart could be precise and outcome-focused.
- Father Hannan could use analogy, scripture or pastoral questions.
- Miss Guthrie could soften difficult truths through euphemism.
- Bernadette could think primarily in terms of reputation and finances.
- Cecilia could reduce explanations to their effect on Arthur and the family.
- Grant could be pragmatic, cautious and geographically observant.

Does everyone pass the “cover the name” test?

My assessment:

Clearly identifiable:

- Arthur
- Emma
- Nellie
- Patricia
- Cecilia in intimate scenes

Usually identifiable through context and temperament:

- Mary
- Helen
- Luke
- James
- Father Hannan

Most likely to blur:

- Miss Guthrie
- Rachel
- Bernadette
- board members
- legal and institutional supporting figures

Overall assessment

Main-character voice: 8/10

Supporting-character voice: 6.5–7/10

Overall dialogue differentiation: approximately 7.5/10

The screenplay does not suffer from every character sounding like the author. Arthur and Emma, who carry the central conflict, are particularly well differentiated. The remaining work would be a **targeted secondary-character pass**, especially across the institutional scenes.

The main priority is not strengthening dialect. It is differentiating each character's **thinking pattern**:

- Arthur personalises.
- Emma institutionalises.
- Cecilia consoles and acts.
- Helen corrects.
- Miss Guthrie persuades and sanitises.
- Patricia records and qualifies.
- Nellie teases.
- James resists.

That underlying distinction is already present; several supporting scenes simply need to express it more consistently.