

A Controlling Sympathy: The Style of Irony in Joyce's "The Dead"

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The plot of James Joyce's "The Dead," on the surface at least, is rather uneventful.¹ Kate and Julia Morkan, two elderly sisters who live with their spinster niece, are holding their annual Christmas dance. Their married nephew, Gabriel Conroy, attends with his wife, and as is his wont on such occasions, delivers a rather unexceptional after-dinner speech. Among the guests is a tenor, Bartell D'Arcy, who sings after much good natured prodding a ballad that affects Gabriel's wife Gretta strangely. After the party, as they walk back in the snow to their hotel room, Gabriel experiences feelings of great passion for his wife. When he approaches her in the hotel room, however, she breaks into tears, and informs him about a former lover she had known when she lived in the country, a young boy who had died, as she believes, for her; the tenor's song had reminded her of the lad. All of Gabriel's complacent assumptions about his own life are in a moment torn down, and yet he responds eventually with "generous tears" of understanding and creature feeling. As the snow continues to fall alike on the living and the dead, Gabriel undergoes an epiphany, a moment of sublime understanding.

A number of critics have maintained that Joyce was depicting symbolically a society of the "living dead." Bernard Benstock, for instance, writes that Joyce's story is chiefly concerned with "those who remain alive, but fail to live: the disillusioned, the self-destructive, the blighted and wasted lives" (149). Hugh Kenner goes so far as to describe "The Dead" as a "definition of living death" (*Dublin's Joyce* 62).² All the characters, according to such a view, are left exposed to the

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²One might add to these names those of James R. Baker and Lionel Trilling. Baker, comparing Joyce and Ibsen, sees the stories in *Dubliners* including "The Dead" as sharing a "common pattern ... Dublin is the realm of the living-dead, paralysis exists on every level of experience and at every

merciless blasts of their author's irony. The Misses Morkan and their niece affect a sham gentility, the grandchildren of a "glue-boiler." The various guests, too, are pretentious and phoney. Gabriel himself, with his pompous sense of dignity and superiority, is shown up; his words ring hollow, and even the emotional certainties upon which he has maintained the comfortable stability of his life are undermined. He is now middle-aged and his wife is no longer beautiful. On top of it all, he learns that for all these years she has not shared his own feelings, but has kept locked in her heart the image of another, younger, untouchably more romantic lover, a young man who has taken the Sophoclean precaution of dying young. Beside this romantic sacrifice, Gabriel's emotional outpourings must surely seem to be "only all palaver" (178).

Against such a view, I would argue that Joyce had a more generous conception of his characters. This is not to say that he does not "detect" them in the limitations of their humanity, that there is not irony at play here, but simply that the irony is gentle and embracing. I have borrowed the word "detect" from Denis Donoghue, who maintains in a splendid book, *The Ordinary Universe*, that Joyce failed to "detect" his character Stephen Dedalus in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and that at least in this respect, Joyce's novel is inferior to a book like the *The Great Gatsby* where the characters are "detected" by their author (66-67). While this failure of detection can be convincingly maintained of *Portrait of the Artist* (perhaps because of the autobiographical origin of that book), it is precisely the accurate detection of character that renders not only "The Dead" but all the stories in *Dubliners* successful.³

Detection, however, does not necessarily entail the sort of withering irony that a critic like Hugh Kenner imputes both to *Portrait of the Artist* and *Dubliners*

stage of life" (67). Trilling, perhaps echoing his own concerns, writes that "Gabriel Conroy's plight, his sense that he has been overtaken by death-in-life, is shared by many in our time" (156). Both these writers, however, Trilling genially and Baker somewhat less so, impose on Joyce the coloring of outside concerns, fitting him to the mold of Ibsen or an "adversary" literature.

³Of course "The Dead" is also "autobiographical" in the sense that Joyce based his characters on people he knew, his family, friends, and himself, but no character has the special personal relevance of Stephen Dedalus, originally conceived as "Stephen Hero," and only later subjected to distancing irony in *Portrait of the Artist* and *Ulysses*. Ellman believes that while Gretta is fairly obviously based on Nora Barnacle, and the Misses Morkan on Joyce's own great-aunts, the character of Gabriel is actually a composite of Joyce himself, his father John Joyce, and a friend named Constantine Curran, whose brother was a priest like Gabriel's brother Constantine (*James Joyce* 1959). Harry Levin describes Gabriel as "a Stephen Dedalus who stayed on to teach school and write occasional reviews" (42). That fact that Gabriel is only partially autobiographical can explain both Joyce's sympathy for and detection of his character in "The Dead."

(*Dublin's Joyce*). It is not within my province to consider the later novel in detail, but I think it is demonstrable that we are meant to sympathize with Gabriel to a considerable degree. Most of the narrative, as we shall see, is given to his perspective. Furthermore, it can be argued that though his consciousness at the end of the story must be expected to undergo extensive revision, this need not be for the worse. Joyce has been at pains to show us that Gabriel's complacent self which was destroyed was not really worth his keeping. And we should not suppose that his life with Gretta is at an end; she will, indeed, at some time in the future wake up, and they will have the opportunity, for the first time, to reestablish their relationship on the firmer ground of full understanding. If we insist too much on seeing "the Dead" of the story as "the living dead" characters in it, we make the mistake of replacing a metaphysical vision of great subtlety with what is essentially a clichéd moral vision of bourgeois vacuity. A detailed consideration of the text should convince us of the complexity of its vision.

What Vladimir Nabokov said of *Madame Bovary* furnishes us with a good approach to all fiction written in the tradition of that book: "Stylistically it is prose doing what poetry is supposed to do" (125). Any reader of "The Dead" should begin by taking account of the textual density of the work. Though conventional and modest enough in comparison with such a production as *Finnegan's Wake*, "The Dead" is nonetheless richly rewarding. From the first line of the story, the language of "The Dead" begins manipulating our assumptions about its characters, their society, and their fates in such a way as to contribute to the wonderfully subtle climax.

We learn first of all that "Lily, the caretaker's daughter, was *literally* run off her feet." (italics mine) As Hugh Kenner points out in his recent book, *Joyce's Voices*, whatever else one might say about Lily, she was not *literally* run off her feet (15). This is an instance, typical of Joyce according to Kenner, where the language of the narrative takes on some of the coloring of the character's own idiolect. This is most likely the sort of thing Lily would have said about herself, had someone taken the trouble to ask her. It is also a subtle indication of social position in a story where concern for social distinction provides a great deal of the imaginative life.

In the same paragraph we are introduced in the breathlessly busy way typical of Lily to "Miss Kate" and "Miss Julia," who, having converted the upstairs bathroom into a "ladies' dressing-room," were to be seen there "gossiping and laughing and fussing, walking after each other to the head of the stairs, peering down over the bannisters and calling down to Lily to ask her who had come." The grammar of the sentence, with its string of participles, suggests already something of

the exciting holiday activity. The detail of the makeshift “ladies’ dressing-room” indicates the extraordinary nature of the day’s events, and also places the “Misses Morkan” socially: they are of the genteel, middle class, able to employ a servant but not prepared on a regular basis for entertaining. Lily, of course, thinks of them politely as “Miss Kate” and “Miss Julia,” and is convinced that the women guests are “ladies.” We should not necessarily take Lily’s control of the narrative, however, as constituting a scathing attack on the pretensions of the bourgeoisie.

In the next paragraph, control of the narrative slips to Kate and Julia; it is their idiolect, and not the young servant girl’s, which gives us: “For years and years [the annual dance] had gone off in splendid style, as long as anyone could remember; ever since Kate and Julia, after the death of their brother Pat, had left the house in Stoney Batter and taken Mary Jane, their only niece, to live with them....That was a good thirty years ago if it was a day” (175-76). This helps to develop our overall sense of them, and gives us also some sense of their ages. Thirty years ago, at least, their niece was “a little girl in short clothes.” Now she is “the main prop of the household,” and of course of an age to make her a prime candidate for spinsterhood. There has also been an evident decline in their standard of living since the time of the house in Stoney Batter when Pat, apparently, was the main prop of the household. The reader should note that Mary Jane and her aunts often act the part of servants to their wealthy students from Kingstown and Dalkey. As the point of perception shifts to Mary Jane, we learn also to distinguish between her elderly aunts, for though Julia, while “quite grey, was still the leading soprano in Adam and Eve’s,” Kate was “too feeble to go about much” and was now reduced to giving music lessons to beginners. Ironically, it is Aunt Julia whose ill health and impending death will first be hinted at and later insisted on. All this introduces a feeling of impending doom which comes gradually to dominate the story. The shift of perception to “the three mistresses” enables Joyce to introduce the main character, Gabriel Conroy, familiarly as “Gabriel” before Lily introduces him formally as “Mr. Conroy,” a formality he likes to keep up. Our knowing him first as “Gabriel,” the dutiful married nephew who could be counted upon in an emergency (for instance, to control a drunken guest like Freddie Malins), assures us that there is a more human, less austere, and less exceptional side to him than he likes to put out. Not everything shall be as it appears.

At this point Gabriel and his wife make their entrance, greeted politely by Lily as Mr. and Mrs. Conroy. They seem the typical bourgeois couple to whom nothing especially eventful ever happens. Gabriel is witty and colloquial, explaining that they are late because “my wife here take three mortal hours to dress herself” (177). (As some critics have noted, this may be taken as an early suggestion of the theme

of death. See Kenneth Burke 410) To Aunt Kate, he says: “Here I am right as the mail” (177). There is nothing extraordinary about all this, but it indicates Gabriel’s security and self-satisfaction. Perhaps the only odd thing is that Gretta, his wife, will hardly strike us as the type who habitually spends “three mortal hours to dress herself”; she is too open and natural for us to imagine her being that vain.

A significant detail is the mention of Gabriel’s goloshes. In Ireland where there is very little snow, goloshes are even now somewhat rare; in Joyce’s day Guttapercha goloshes were rarer still, “the latest things” from the continent. Though Gabriel makes no big deal about them, they would have struck people as rather fussy or extravagant. Indeed a little later on, Gretta chides Gabriel about them.

—Goloshes! said Mrs. Conroy. That’s the latest. Whenever it’s wet underfoot I must put on my goloshes. Tonight even, he wanted me to put them on, but I wouldn’t. The next thing he’ll buy me will be a diving suit. Gabriel laughed nervously and patted his tie reassuringly, while Aunt Kate nearly doubled herself, so heartily did she enjoy the joke. The smile soon faded from Aunt Julia’s face and her mirthless eyes were directed towards her nephew’s face. After a pause she asked:

—And what are goloshes, Gabriel?

—Goloshes, Julia! exclaimed her sister. Goodness me, don’t you know what goloshes are? You wear them over your ... over your boots, Gretta, isn’t it?

—Yes, said Mrs. Conroy. Guttapercha things. We both have a pair now. Gabriel says everyone wears them on the Continent.

—O, on the Continent, murmured Aunt Julia, nodding her head slowly. Gabriel knitted his brows and said, as if he were slightly angered:

—It’s nothing very wonderful, but Gretta thinks it very funny because she says the word reminds her of Christy Minstrels. (180-81)

In this scene, Joyce begins to employ a gentle irony against the pretensions of his characters. Gabriel is shown to be of a higher level of culture and awareness than his aunts, but also to be rather stuffy and even a bit of a prig. The natural Gretta makes fun of his cosmopolitan pretensions, which upsets him, as we feel, more than it ought. The reader should notice that whenever Gabriel feels uncomfortable he escapes into an outward gesture of some sort, such as patting

his necktie, or flicking his boots. These gestures act rather like emotional circuit-breakers when a situation becomes too hot. And many situations do, for we see that in contrast to Gretta, Gabriel is extremely self-conscious, so much so that his awareness of other people is obscured and his interaction with them hindered. He cannot easily laugh at even a friendly joke made at his own expense. In contrast to Aunt Kate, who doubles over with laughter, or Gretta herself who laughs naturally, Gabriel laughs “nervously.” With all his self-conscious posturing, he has trouble acting naturally and frequently fails, as here, to produce the desired effect.

We have already noticed this in his scene with Lily. He tries to be condescending (in the old sense) and falls flat. Perhaps this is because again he is more full of himself than observant. He can notice that she speaks with a less cultured accent than he, but he has no real empathy for her, or understanding of her reaction to him. Indeed, it is thoughtless of him to ask a girl of her low station if she still attends school. He can only compound his offense in a rather smug, bourgeois way by assuming that if she is no longer in school, she must be about to hear wedding bells. Lily answers him sharply: “The men that is now is only all palaver and what they can get out of you.” The remark is significant in that it subtly introduces a main theme of the story: the real or imagined superiority of the past to the present, of the dead to the feeble living, who are all words. Though not a rake, Gabriel will soon find himself in a similar position in relation to his wife’s former lover, a man of mere words to a man of action. Gabriel’s extreme self-consciousness leads him now, as later with Miss Ivors and finally with Gretta, to failure. Typically, he escapes from Lily through the outward action of flicking his boots,⁴ and further distances himself from her by forcing her to accept his charity. This action affirms his social superiority and the sense of security this confers on him. As Allen Tate notes, “from [this] moment, we know Gabriel Conroy ... we have had him rendered” (405).

It is interesting that Joyce chooses this rather awkward moment to give us our first, uncomfortable physical description of Gabriel. It is too intimate an exposure for the dignified figure Gabriel would like to cut:

He was a stout, tallish young man. The high colour of his cheeks pushed upwards even to his forehead, where it scattered itself in a few formless patches of pale red; and on his hairless face there scintillated restlessly the polished lenses and the bright gilt rims of the glasses

⁴The flicking of snow from Gabriel’s boots has also been seen by critics like Allen Tate (408) and Kenneth Burke (410) as an early suggestion of death, the first appearance of the snow symbolism that comes gradually to dominate the story.

which screened his delicate and restless eyes. His glossy black hair was parted in the middle and brushed in a long curve behind his ears where it curled slightly beneath the groove left by his hat. (178)

One can imagine what Gabriel's discomfort would be if he found himself so closely scrutinized. In fact, Gabriel does not and cannot see himself with anything like this honesty until the final scene when he is alone in the hotel room with Gretta and glimpses himself in the mirror. What he then sees, and with an almost metaphysical insight that conveys both physical and spiritual implications at once, is the somewhat unpleasant figure we have been given so early on. It may be, indeed, that any such close scrutiny of a human being tends by the nature of it to reduce him comically, to render him grotesque. From the beginning, Joyce commits such sensuous detail to a strategy of controlling our view of Gabriel; we are meant to recognize, before he does, his unheroic proportions. This is not, however, a completely merciless exposure. We are encouraged, within these limits, to sympathize with Gabriel. For most of the story Gabriel is in charge of the narrative, and it is through his perceptions that most of the other characters are exposed. It is only that we are not to take him at his own evaluation of himself, and Joyce's subtle control of narrative perspective assures this.

To see this, one has only to compare the description of Gabriel with one a few pages later of Freddie Malins, who on this occasion is enjoying what is perhaps his final drinking bout before undergoing the drinking cure at the Trappist monastery at Mount Melleray. Freddie is engagingly more jovial than Gabriel, but he is subjected to even harsher scrutiny.

Gabriel could be seen piloting Freddie Malins across the landing. The latter, a young man of about forty, was of Gabriel's size and build, with very round shoulders. His face was fleshy and pallid, touched with colour only at the thick hanging lobes of his ears and at the wide wings of his nose. He had coarse features, a blunt nose, a convex and receding brow, tumid and protruded lips. His heavy-lidded eyes and the disorder of his scanty hair made him look sleepy. (184)

Certainly here is a description to make Gabriel seem quite attractive by comparison, but this is not necessarily the effect. We do not mind the evident grotesqueness of Freddie Malins quite so much, perhaps because he affects the low role of the clown, while Gabriel asserts his own dignity and will aspire to the role of the romantic lead. Unlike Gabriel, Freddie Malins is unself-conscious, "laughing heartily in high key." Through this he exercises claims to participation in a comic

spirit which renders him somewhat immune to our censure. A number of the minor characters (Mr. Browne, for instance, whose face wrinkles with mirth as he pours himself glasses of whiskey) are similarly redeemed through acceptance of festivity. They are more comic than ridiculous.

The character of Gretta Conroy is more complex, in fact the most mysterious in the story. Unlike her husband, she does not control the narrative perspective at all in the early part of the story, and therefore, we get very little of her interior life, either directly or by implication. Of course, this is because Joyce wants to heighten his climax by locking the reader into Gabriel's ignorance. But it makes what little information we do get subtle, interesting, and significant.

We see her first as nothing out of the ordinary, but good natured and pleasantly unaffected in comparison with Gabriel. Soon, however, while Mary Jane is playing the piano, we learn in a sort of interior monologue of Gabriel's that his mother, who had high aspirations for her son, had once disparaged Gretta as being "country cute."

A shadow passed over his face as he remembered her sullen opposition to his marriage. Some slighting phrases she had used still rankled in his memory; she had once spoken of Gretta as being country cute and that was not true of Gretta at all. It was Gretta who had nursed her during all her last long illness in their house at Monkstown. (187)

It is interesting that although the narrative, through Gabriel's idiolect, specifically denies his mother's assertion, we are inclined rather to believe it. It is our first inkling of something in her past, at least of some aspect of her which Gabriel refuses to recognize. "Country cute," perhaps, has connotations not unlike those of Hamlet's "country matters." The hint of an unbridled sexuality will also turn up later when Gretta speaks of walking with Michael Furey "the way they do in the country" (221).

However strenuously Gabriel would like to deny it, Gretta's "countryness" is insisted upon. It is prominent in the scene of his confrontation with the Irish nationalist, Miss Ivors. Both she and Gabriel are academics and colleagues, but we learn that Gabriel is what she calls a "West Briton," or sympathizer with England, while she is a strong nationalist, rather like a fictionalized Maud Gonne. Miss Ivors, however, can hardly be said to "dwell in lover's eyes." Joyce describes her in a-sexual terms: "She was a frank-mannered, talkative young lady, with a freckled face and prominent brown eyes. She did not wear a low-cut bodice and the large brooch which was fixed in the front of her collar bore on it an Irish device" (187). She is hardly an attractive character in comparison with Gretta, but she is the

perfect foil for Gabriel's affected cosmopolitanism. After duly upbraiding Gabriel for publishing literary reviews in the pro-British *Daily Express*, she invites him to make an excursion to the west of Ireland.

—It would be splendid for Gretta too if she'd come. She's from Connacht, isn't she?

—Her people are, said Gabriel shortly.

* * * * *

—Well, we usually go to France or Belgium or perhaps Germany, said Gabriel awkwardly.

—And why do you go to France and Belgium, said Miss Ivors, instead of visiting your own land?(189)

Miss Ivors continues to press Gabriel until he comes out with "I'm sick of my own country, sick of it!" Once again, he has failed socially because of his lack of insight into other people. Of particular interest is his attempt, in harmony with his own deracination, to separate Gretta from "her people," and her roots in the country and the past. In his imagination he would remake his wife in the mold of himself. That Gabriel is deluded we learn not long after this when Gretta, contrary to his expectation, expresses enthusiasm about the idea of visiting Galway, her provincial hometown in Connacht.

It is, of course, no coincidence that the country in the west of Ireland is associated with Gretta's past and comes to be associated with the past itself, and thus death. An easy step connects the journey to the west of Ireland with the journey to death, which is traditionally associated with the west. The connection is made explicit in the final paragraph of the story:

The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly on the Bog of Allen and, further westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling too on every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead. (223-24)

The passage is remarkable, among other things, in that it is full of archetypal images of death: the journey westward, “the dark mutinous Shannon waves,” the graveyard, the crosses, “the barren thorns” (these last, like the crosses, suggesting central Christian images), and finally the snow itself, suggesting the unifying consciousness of the essential inseparableness of the living and the dead. And, of course, central among the dead is Michael Furey, the representative of the past who defeats Gabriel’s very conception of himself.

The notion that the living suffer in comparison with the dead, the present with the past, has been well prepared for us. The reader will remember Lily’s angry retort: “The men that is now is only all palaver and what they can get out of you.” On a comic level, this sums up a central theme of the story. Another important variation on the theme is the dinner conversation about opera singers.

Mary Jane led the table back to the legitimate opera. One of her students had given her a pass for *Mignon*. Of course it was very fine, she said but it made her think of poor Georgina Burns. Mr. Browne could go back farther still, to the old Italian companies that used to come to Dublin—Tietjens, Ilma de Murzka, Campaini, the great Trebelli, Giuglini, Ravelli, Aramburo. Those were the days, he said, when there was something like singing to be heard in Dublin. He told too of how the top galley of the old Royal used to be packed night after night, of how one night an Italian tenor had sung five encores to *Let Me Like a Soldier Fall*, introducing a high C every time, and of how the galley boys would sometimes in their enthusiasm unyoke the horses from the carriage of some great *prima donna* and pull her themselves through the streets to her hotel. Why did they never play the grand old operas now, he asked, *Dinorah*, *Lucrezia Borgia*? Because they could not get the voices to sing them: that was why.

—Oh, well, said Mr. Bartell D’Arcy, I presume there are as good singers today as there were then.

—Where are they? asked Mr. Browne defiantly.

—In London, Paris, Milan, said Mr. Bartell D’Arcy warmly. I suppose Caruso, for example is quite as good, if not better than any of the men you have mentioned.

—Maybe so, said Mr. Browne. But I may tell you I doubt it strongly.

—Oh, I’d give anything to hear Caruso sing, said Mary Jane.

—For me, said Aunt Kate, who had been picking a bone, there was only one tenor. To please me, I mean. But I suppose none of you ever heard of him.

—Who was he, Miss Morkan? asked Mr. Bartell D'Arcy politely.

—His name, said Aunt Kate, was Parkinson. I heard him when he was in his prime and I think he had then the purest tenor voice that ever was put into a man's throat.

—Strange, said Mr. Bartell D'Arcy. I never even heard of him.

—Yes, yes, Miss Morkan is right, said Mr. Browne. I remember hearing of old Parkinson but he's too far back for me.

—A beautiful, pure, sweet, mellow English tenor, said Aunt Kate with enthusiasm. (198-200)

In an age when Caruso has assumed the inviolable mantel of legend (who in our time would go so far as to compare, say, Pavarotti quite favorably with him?), it is amusing to hear the resistance of Mr. Browne and some others to any recognition of Caruso as the equal of the likes of Trebelli or Giuglini, now quite forgotten. In fact, only Mary Jane and the "modern" singer Bartell D'Arcy will go so far as to praise Caruso. Aunt Kate suggests her own preference for a man completely unknown and perhaps even fictional. The point, of course, is that to the characters in this story (as we shall see, including Gretta), the memory of the dead completely overshadows any effort of the living. The reader should keep in mind the fact that Michael Furey was himself a singer of the old time.

The idea of the past overwhelming the present also makes an appearance on the level of abstract banality in Gabriel's speech.

—Ladies and Gentlemen.

—A new generation is growing up in our midst, a generation actuated by new ideas and new principles. It is serious and enthusiastic for these new ideas and its enthusiasm, even when it is misdirected, is, I believe, in the main sincere. But we are living in a sceptical and, if I may use the phrase, a thought-tormented age: and sometimes I fear that this new generation, educated or hyper-educated as it is, will lack those qualities of humanity, of hospitality, of kindly humour which belonged to an older day. Listening tonight to the names of all those great singers of the past it seemed to me, I must confess,

that we were living in a less spacious age. Those days might, without exaggeration, be called spacious days: and if they are gone beyond recall let us hope, at least, that in gatherings such as this we shall still speak of them with pride and affection, still cherish in our hearts the memory of those dead and gone great ones whose fame the world will not willingly let die. (203)

The irony of this speech, is that Gabriel has no idea of the effect his own conventional pleasantries about the past have on Gretta. Although we too, locked in Gabriel's perception, do not suspect it, a speech about "those dead and gone great ones whose fame the world will not willingly let die" can only remind Gretta of the great romantic love of her life, Michael Furey. The scene, in fact, typifies Gabriel's lack of intuitive sympathy with other people, including his wife.

Gabriel is socially mistaken or inept on many levels: his failure with Lily, the controversy with Miss Ivors, the inappropriate speech, where, among other absurdities, he calls his aunts and cousin "the Three Graces of the Dublin musical world" (204). One night also instance the famous "Distant Music" passage.

Gabriel had not gone to the door with the others. He was in a dark part of the hall gazing up the staircase. A woman was standing near the top of the first flight, in the shadow also. He could not see her face but he could see the terra-cotta and salmon-pink panels of her skirt which the shadow made appear black and white. It was his wife. She was leaning on the banisters, listening to something. Gabriel was surprised at her stillness and strained his ear to listen also. But he could hear little save the noise of laughter and dispute on the front steps, a few chords struck on the piano and a few notes of a man's voice singing.

He stood still in the gloom of the hall, trying to catch the air that the voice was singing and gazing up at his wife. There was grace and mystery in her attitude as if she were a symbol of something. He asked himself what is a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow, listening to distant music, a symbol of. If he were a painter he would paint her in that attitude. Her blue felt hat would show off the bronze of her hair against the darkness and the dark panels of her skirt would show off the light ones. *Distant Music* he would call the picture if he were a painter. (209-10)

Even in a private moment contemplating his wife, Gabriel cannot give up the pose. He insists on viewing her "as if she were a symbol of something." He

affects, at precisely the wrong moment, an artificial, “aesthetic” relation to Gretta. In fact, she is at this moment engrossed in the folk song being sung by Bartell D’Arcy, which as it turns out, was one sung also by Michael Furey.

O the rain falls on my heavy locks
And the dew wets my skin,
My babe likes cold. . . (210)

Gabriel, of course, misinterprets his wife’s passionate response to this as a longing to respond to him. Actually, the lyrics suggest Michael Furey standing under a tree in the rain on the last night before Gretta was to leave, the night when he told her he no longer wished to live.

Indeed, the song may suggest even more than that. Later on, when she confesses her affair with Michael Furey, Gretta remarks: “I was great with him at that time” (220). It may be possible to infer from this an unwanted pregnancy, which would supply a sufficient motive for Gretta’s family’s separating her from Michael Furey and shipping her off to a convent, a traditional dumping ground for such cases. Gretta’s having been pregnant would also go some distance towards explaining the strange depth of her passion for the young boy, and indeed it would increase the depth of Gabriel’s humiliation.

We should not be too hard on Gabriel, however. Certainly a great deal of irony has by now been pointed at him; he has been indeed “a ludicrous figure, acting as a penny-boy for his aunts, a nervous, well-meaning sentimentalist, orating at vulgarities and idealizing his own clownish lusts, the pitiable fatuous fellow he had caught a glimpse of in the mirror” (220). Yet since the time of the speech, at least, we have begun to see him as a more genial, human character than we were allowed to see previously. The anecdote he tells about Patrick Morkan and his horse is unpretentious and amusing, and the passion he feels for Gretta on the way home, though perhaps banal and even a bit fatuous, is genuine, attractive, and moving. The wine, perhaps, has broken his pretension and inhibition. Whatever the cause, the effect is to endear Gabriel to the reader in a way we had not expected. It is only at this point that he is humiliated with the bizarre *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia* of the final scene in the hotel room.

This seems to be Joyce’s deliberate strategy. As C.C. Loomis points out, “if the reader identifies himself unreservedly with Gabriel in the first ninety percent of the story, he will lose that critical insight into him which is necessary for full apprehension of his vision ... [and] he is liable to miss those very shortcomings which make the vision meaningful” (149). The shortcomings, as we have seen, are fairly obvious. The exact nature of the “vision” has been much debated. David

Daiches, for instance, who views the story positively, treats Gabriel's epiphany in aesthetic terms. Daiches notes that "the indifferent acceptance of life as something revolving not round the artist's ego but on its independent axis is for Joyce the ideal aesthetic attitude" (82), and goes on to say that "The Dead" is a "fable" illustrating this view (82). Florence Walzl, in an interesting essay summarizing the major criticism, argues that the way one reads the ending of "The Dead" seems to depend on whether one views it as the culminating story in *Dubliners* or an independent work (424-25). Thus, critics like Hugh Kenner and Brewster Ghiselin, who treat "The Dead" as part of the whole book of stories and emphasize certain "unifying" themes, tend to see it as a summation of negativism; Gabriel's vision is one of "identification with the dead" (Walzl 424). In Kenner's phrase, Gabriel finds at the end of the story that his "proper medium" (*Dublin's Joyce* 64) is death. On the other hand, critics like Daiches, Kenneth Burke, and Allen Tate, who view the story as an entity in itself, see the final vision as "a rebirth experience" (Walzl 443). Walzl herself believes that Joyce deliberately imposed on his work "a pattern of ambivalent symbols and a great final ambiguity" (443).

Indeed, the circumstances of publication seem to have dictated to Joyce the logic of this solution. He began writing some of the stories in *Dubliners* before leaving Ireland in 1904, and he completed an early version of the volume in 1906. Walzl notes that the letter so many of the negative critics cite, in which Joyce claims that he chose the Dublin setting because that city seemed to him the "centre of paralysis," was written in May 1906, well before the composition of "The Dead" (425). Thus "The Dead" seems to have been an afterthought reflecting not merely Joyce's growing experience and maturity, but his changing attitude as well. Despite the natural attraction of seeking unifying themes, we should be careful not to bind "The Dead" by the strictures the other stories impose upon themselves. As S.L. Goldberg argues, "The Dead's" "deeply felt conviction, its originality, its complex yet assured ironies, its humility before life, place it apart from the rest of *Dubliners*. Fine as they are, the other stories stand judged by this" (46). Because of this, we should feel free to follow the story through its epiphany toward its greater depths of understanding. Gabriel's longing at one point to extricate himself from the situation of the party and walk alone in the snow need not be, as Kenner suggests (as much as anything by analogy with earlier stories) "a longing for ... death" (*Dublin's Joyce* 68). Just as easily, the longing could be for a higher form of selflessness, the moral parallel of Daiches "aesthetic ideal," which has very strong roots in Christian tradition, and indeed should not involve the death wish. Kenneth Burke, we should remember, sees the snow as "the *mythic image*, in the world of conditions, standing for the transcendence above the conditioned"

(415-16).

Finally, if we do not conclude, with Hugh Kenner, that Joyce took a malicious delight in the ironic exposure of his character, we should seek in the humbling of Gabriel's pride some spiritual preparation for the "epiphany" which in the final pages he achieves. This insight is a profound one: the essential unity and equality of all mankind in death. It is an insight which gathers up and defeats all the social or political pretensions with which we have become familiar in the story.

Generous tears filled Gabriel's eyes. He had never felt like that himself towards any woman, but he knew that such a feeling must be love. The tears gathered more thickly in his eyes and in the partial darkness he imagined he saw the form of a young man standing under a dripping tree. Other forms were near. His soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead. He was conscious of, but could not apprehend, their wayward and flickering existence. His own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world: the solid world itself, which these dead had one time reared and lived in, was dissolving and dwindling. (223)

Homer Obed Brown, following Ellman, speaks of Gabriel's insight at the end of the story in terms of "the death of egoism" (99). And what seems to be the emotive image of Calvary supports and strengthens this: Gabriel's old and bankrupt sense of self dies so that a new and finer one may be born. If we are disposed to translate a secular tale into the familiar terminology of Christianity, "the form of a young man standing under a dripping tree" does seem very like a figure of Christ, and Gabriel's fading identity very like those rare things, Christian selflessness and humility. And the approach to these is mediated by Gabriel's hard earned, very human love, "the word known to all men" which according to Richard Ellman informs Joyce's masterpiece, *Ulysses*, and proves, in Ellman's phrase, "the closest we can come to paradise" (*New York Times Book Review* 37). Far from culminating "the centre of paralysis" depicted in Joyce's earliest stories, "The Dead" points the way toward the great comedy of life in his mature fiction.

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