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Critical Essay

Death, The Past, and Self Reflection in Joyce's "The Dead"

James Joyce's collection of short stories, *Dubliners*, was written over the course of nearly a decade beginning in 1905, and was published on the first day of the year 1914, a timeline laced with both national and personal turmoil for Ireland and Joyce. The final story, "The Dead", appears peculiarly simplistic on the first read, but after further examination reveals itself to be impressively complex and overflowing with symbols, political statements, binaries, and ambiguous messages. Many literary critics have contributed their interpretations of the story about its unusual elements such as the snow and other romantic elements, and the conversation continues to expand. In the story, Joyce likens the living and the dead to seem more alike than they are different, and displays that one cannot exist without the other's influence. Throughout "The Dead" and most especially in the final scene, Joyce uses elements that are of the natural world to tackle the idea of people "sleepwalking" through their lives, the concept that those who have passed away continue to influence those who have not, and the symbolization of these elements to represent that the natural world prompts self-realization and a shift in perspective. Through these scenes and the incorporation of romanticism, Joyce displays that the past haunts the present and influences the future.

Joyce moved to Rome in 1906, shortly after beginning his *Dubliners* project. The past few years had been filled with death for Joyce, a theme that is reflected within *Dubliners*, especially in "The Dead". He was fascinated and traumatized by the aftermath of the eruption of

Mount Vesuvius and Rome's historical and apparent past. But for Joyce, death was everywhere, haunting the living. Even his city was a ghost, a corpse of what it used to be. Joyce stitches this central theme into "The Dead" but the way that those who have passed are represented within the text is ambiguous and lead to a realization, leaving the reader to experience a feeling that mirrors what the characters within the text. Garry Leonard explains this phenomenon: "We read the stories, determined to ferret out what they mean, only to end up wondering about ourselves. Paradoxically, the protean quality of these stories – the way they seem to have something to say about everything – makes them appear, to the first time reader, to be about nothing at all" (Leonard 87). This obscurity of meaning mimics the divide between the living and the dead and exemplifies humans' frequent failure to acknowledge the past.

Joyce emphasizes the characters' busy lives and their humanness, such as when Gabriel and Gretta arrive at the dinner party late: "But they forget that my wife here takes three mortal hours to dress herself" (Joyce 1249). The party attendees are seen dancing and listening to music throughout the night, but are contrasted with the subtle images of death scattered throughout the household. On the wall hang images that appear romantic and tragically beautiful but easily fade into the background, "a picture of the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet* hung there and beside it was a picture of the two murdered princes in the Tower" (Joyce 1255). The art on the walls and the music that echoes through the house exist as a comfort and pleasure to the living, while simultaneously carrying the memories of the dead and serving as a reminder of the past.

As he prepares for his much anticipated speech, Gabriel reminisces and attempts to summarize the actions and focuses that make the living human: "He ran over the headings of his speech: Irish hospitality, sad memories, the Three Graces, Paris, the quotation from Browning. He repeated to himself a phrase he had written in his review: *One feels that one is listening to a*

thought-tormented music” (Joyce 1258). If music, a nonphysical way for humans to communicate with each other, is symbolic for the dead and the past, then the phrase at the end of this passage once again shows the presence of these memories at all times of life.

After dancing, everyone indulges in the mortal pleasures of an abundance of food and superficial conversation, consumed again with the affairs of the living. As Rachel Billigheimer observes in an issue of College Language Association Journal, “The guests gather round a plentifully laden dinner table. There is no meaningful communication or action until Gabriel delivers a speech honouring the noteworthy achievements of the deceased” (Billigheimer 472). However, Gabriel intervenes and exemplifies how the dead live on through the livings’ memories of them: “—Let us toast them all three together. Let us drink to their health, wealth, long life, happiness and prosperity and may they long continue to hold the proud and self-won position which they hold in their profession and the position of honour and affection which they hold in our hearts” (Joyce 1266). They cheers to the memories of the dead, inspiring the party attendees how to continue with their lives in the present. Gabriel encourages the longevity of the dead’s legacies, while he does not realize how this will soon affect him personally. As readers, we come to see the irony in Gabriel’s speech near the end of the story when Gretta’s past love is revealed and Gabriel has his own realization about the past’s influence on current day.

Just before he makes this declaration, however, Gabriel acknowledges that it is difficult, if not impossible, to escape the past despite the speed of our busy lives: “—Therefore, I will not linger on the past. I will not let any gloomy moralizing intrude upon us here to-night. Here we are gathered together for a brief moment from the bustle and rush of our everyday routine...” (Joyce 1265). Gabriel is an example of living in the present to an extreme, essentially rejecting the past and attempting to remain ignorant towards it. However, he finds that when we slow

down and allow outlets such as music and elements of the natural world to reference the past, we make unavoidable realizations about the present.

After Gretta and Gabriel leave the party and arrive at the hotel, emotions begin to consume them. While the evening has blinded Gabriel with desire for Gretta, the music floods Gretta with the reminder of the lover from her youth and the loss she experienced when he died. As LeBlanc suggests, “Furey was ‘not properly buried’, not properly put to rest as an other in Gretta’s life, and she now feels responsible for the meaning of her young lover’s existence” (LeBlanc 33). Despite Gretta’s attempts to move on with her life and build relationships after the death of Michael Furey, his memory impedes on her ability to connect with Gabriel. This barrier between the past and present – and one’s acceptance of its existence – is broken down by immaterial elements such as the music.

The final scene brings both Gabriel’s revelation and Joyce’s message to a head: “A few light taps upon the pane made him turn to the window. It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland” (Joyce 1277). Here the snow is depicted as an inescapable force of nature that provokes the unveiling of the past and draws the commonality amongst all.

“It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, upon 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.” (Joyce 1277)

The final sentence emphasizes the action of falling, and the anticipation of the snow reaching the ground. It is inevitable that the snow will eventually reach the ground, in the same way that death will eventually find each living individual. Simultaneously, the snow represents the fragility and the impermanence of life. The snow descends as Gretta confesses her memories of Michael Furey, further complicating its meaning.

As emotional as the final scene appears, what seems to disrupt Gabriel's desire for Gretta more than even the discovery that his wife had experienced true love before him is the sudden comprehension of the past's continual influence on the present. Further, Gabriel arrives at the conclusion that the physical cannot exist without the spiritual, and has "the sudden realization that for his wife the memory of a long dead lover has greater reality than does the physical presence of her living husband which precipitates a crisis of self-evaluation in Gabriel," (Walzl 20). It is only then that Gabriel fully understands his ignorance to the past and how it affects his relationship with Gretta. Here Joyce touches on the concept that the living dictate how those who have passed are remembered, and Jim LeBlanc expands on this: "...we are fully responsible for the dead. It is up to the living to decide the meaning of the lives of the deceased, their status, their fate" (LeBlanc 30). By Gretta responding to the music in the emotional way that she did, she determines Michael Furey's fate and prolongs his spiritual life past his physical being.

In this instance, the past jeopardizes the present and leaves Gabriel and Gretta uncertain about how to react to the events that have unfolded. Jim LeBlanc writes "this ending is, moreover, tantalizingly indeterminate for it is impossible to know how Gabriel will go on with his life, a life in which a dead boy, about whom Gabriel has never before known, will forever play a role, at least insofar as his relationship with Gretta is concerned," restating that the past

cannot be left behind (LeBlanc 27-28). The snow outside the window persists, just as Michael's memory refuses to be forgotten.

James Joyce contrasts the living and the dead in "The Dead" using nonphysical carriers of memory and identities such as art, music, and even the snow. Gabriel functions to symbolize the common mistake humans make in living in the present to the extent that we ignore the past. Meanwhile, Gretta serves as the opposite as someone who cannot separate the past from present. Through these symbols and characters, Joyce expresses the influence that those who have passed have on those who remain in the physical world and the idea that examining them can spark crucial realizations about oneself and the world around them.

Works Cited

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