

The Snow was General: A presentation by Mary Lou Anderson

It is a pleasure to be here today to talk to you about *The Dead*, one of the short stories from Dubliners by James Joyce. Before we get into the elements of this story, I would like to give you some background information about both James Joyce and his book. Joyce is recognized as an influential contributor to the 20th century modernist avant-garde. Margot Norris, the editor of the Norton Critical Edition of Dubliners writes, Dubliners is arguably one of the most famous collections of short stories written in English.¹ Included in this collection is the story, *The Dead*. In her book James Joyce a life, Edna O'Brien describes Joyce as a man of extravagant tastes, blatant inconsistencies, and vagabond ways.² His life, like his writing did not follow a linear path. Raised in Ireland, he lived most of his adult life in continental Europe. It was from self-imposed exile that Joyce found his literary voice. Perhaps, from a distance, it was easier to write as Joyce called it, in a "style of scrupulous meanness".³

Joyce was born into a middleclass Dublin family in 1882. When Joyce was a young man, his mother died having given birth to 16 children. He was the eldest of 10 surviving siblings. In 1893, his father, John, found himself unemployed which resulted in a life of drinking and financial mismanagement, one that spiraled the family into crippling poverty. A life style that must have had an influence on the young and impressionable James. According to O'Brien, Joyce was also fond of drink and a master borrower, living a bohemian lifestyle supported by wealthy friends and generous patrons. Prior to hard times consuming the Joyce family, James was schooled mainly by the Jesuits and

¹ James Joyce. *"Dubliners": Norton Critical Editions* edited by Margot Norris (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2006), ix

² Edna O'Brien. *James Joyce: a life*, (New York: Penguin Group, 1999), 1

³ James Joyce. *"Dubliners": Norton Critical Editions*, ix

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graduated from University College Dublin. At age 22, he migrated to Europe and although, he never again resided in Dublin, Ireland remained his creative inspiration. Joyce saw Dublin as a major capital, the second largest city in the British Empire but also as a place suffering from a certain paralysis, and thus a city overlooked by western society.⁴ Joyce wrote about the Dublin he knew; a city caught between the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

At this time, the United Kingdom was moving from the Victorian to the Edwardian years just before the First World War. It was the advent of modernity and came in the form of rising industrialization and technical advancement. It was the new age of motion pictures, automobiles and the airplane. It was the height of British dominance and imperialism, foreign lands and their wealth of natural resources supporting and influencing cities like Dublin. Ireland's union with Britain was economically beneficial but at the same time, it was the provocation for political unrest. Socialism was on the rise, Irish Nationals were pushing for self-government, women were arguing for the right to vote and trade unions were demanding higher wages and better working conditions.

Dubliners was a compilation of seemingly simple stories that have been crafted with a certain human complexity. They were written mainly between 1904 and 1910. Joyce intended them to be "epiclets"⁵ designed to present certain aspects of Dublin life to the world but the stories are direct and penetrating with a view of the city that was not initially well received. After a number of re-writes and rejections, the book was finally published in 1914. Many of the stories include modern concerns, characters struggling with self-image and doubt. *The Dead* written in 1907 is just such a story.

⁴ James Joyce. "Dubliners": Norton Critical Editions, ix

⁵ Ibid. ix

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James Joyce's *The Dead* is about a journey. This journey moves the protagonist across a celebratory evening and into the early hours of the next day. As events unfold, the snow falls. The weather and the presence of snow comes into conversation over and over throughout the piece. It binds the story together and gives it continuity. It is 1903 and the party guests are just newly into the 20th century. There is a sense of time and place but there is more to it. The snow acts as a symbol with a seductive omnipresence that reinforces a pervading sense of paralysis. Snow is not common in Ireland. This snow fall is "general", a weather pattern that is affecting the whole country. It somehow alters events and changes an occasion of simple celebration into an opportunity for political statement and an examination of temporal existence. Joyce uses snow like he uses the simple short story, to create a space which tempers and insulates the truth about an Ireland caught in modern development which he saw as killing past traditions and a familiar way of life.

The snow establishes a time of year. Falling and blowing snow can blind and impair vision. It can hide a familiar landscape making it different. Snow acts as an insulator, deadening sound. Snow can fill the air with moisture and dampness or depending on a few degrees of temperature make it crisp and cold. Depending on the severity of the storm, it can impede travel and cause problems. On the other hand, It can also be seductive and beautiful. It can create a sense of calm. It can represent death as in the phrase "frozen to death" or can indicate innocence like "pure as the driven snow".

It does not snow often in Ireland, Mary Jane, the niece of Miss Kate and Miss Julia the hosts of the Christmas party in this story, states: "I read this morning in the

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newspaper that the snow is general all over Ireland". "I think Christmas is never really Christmas unless we have snow on the ground...We haven't had snow like it for thirty years." ⁶ The last time there was this kind of snow in Ireland, Mary Jane came to live with the aunts.⁷ For this family there is a tie between important events and falling snow. The Morkan sisters host a party every year and Lily, the maid, tells the reader it is "always a great affair". ⁸ It is a special day not only because of the party but also because of the unusual snow fall. The events of this party and this night are in some way clandestine.

The main character, Gabriel, is an angel to his aunts. Like the snow, he is worth their attention. He can be counted on and he takes responsibility for tasks like carving the dinner roast. He is well educated like Joyce himself, having "taken his degree in the royal university". ⁹ He is the right man to speak at the party although he worries his Robert Browning reference and the language of the speech may be "above the heads of his hearers". ¹⁰ Gabriel has integrity and is generous. He offers a Christmas "tip" to Lily for her service to his aunts. He can "loan" money to young Freddy Malins, a guest the Morkan sisters fear will arrive at the party drunk, because, to Gabriel, Freddy is not "a bad fellow at heart". ¹¹ Gabriel's relationship to the hosts, his social position and prosperity suggests he is comfortable, but it is his sense of place and personal worth that comes into question over the course of the evening.

⁶ James Joyce. *"Dubliners": Norton Critical Editions*, 184.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹¹ James Joyce. *"Dubliners": Norton Critical Editions*, 189.

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His aunts watch for his arrival, they fuss because it is well after ten o'clock and yet there is no sign "on such a night"¹² of Gabriel and his wife Gretta. From the beginning, the weather and Gabriel are linked. Events have an inter-dependence in *The Dead*. When Gabriel and Gretta enter the house, they enter a circle of light and warmth. It is a traditional home that Gabriel will later describe as a place of "genuine warmhearted courteous Irish hospitality".¹³ He must scrape the snow from his over shoes, his galoshes, when he comes in. There is a light fringe of snow on his shoulders and the buttons of his overcoat are snow stiffened.¹⁴ At the door, Gabriel removes his protection from the cold and by doing so he gets rid of the snow which represents the natural world outside. This removal makes him vulnerable. Joyce has carefully selected words throughout the story with a double meaning. These words suggest political or personal attributes, a policy gone "cold" or no longer viable, a "cold person" as in one without life, a "stiff" drink-strong to numb the mind or a "stiff" old man, like a corpse ready for the grave. Joyce describes Gabriel in great detail, a pattern that is not repeated with each guest. By calling his boots "galoshes", it reminds us that proper dress like proper language is important to Gabriel.

Galoshes are "the latest";¹⁵ new to Ireland, modern and stylish. They are made of rubber which comes from Malaysia available in Ireland because of British trade. It makes them exotic and desirable. Gabriel buys them for his wife and she in turn, teases him. She jokes "The next thing he will buy me is a diving suit".¹⁶ The suit being another

¹² Ibid., 153.

¹³ Ibid., 176.

¹⁴ Ibid., 153.

¹⁵ James Joyce. *"Dubliners": Norton Critical Editions*, 156.

¹⁶ Ibid., 156.

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protective garment made to insulate. Gretta can live without galoshes and in her mind, galoshes are foolish and because of the association of attire to personality, Gabriel believes she sees him as foolish. Gabriel takes this teasing as a personal assault and he reacts by laughing nervously and patting his tie. He finds reassurance in his proper dress. This checking action constructs a visual which reinforces the need for conformity and social acceptance on the part of the protagonist.

Lily is the first to attend to Gabriel. She prepares him for the evening's events. She keeps him in the little pantry while the ladies go upstairs to primp. Joyce uses an element of foreshadowing with the weather. "Is it snowing again, Mr. Conroy?"¹⁷ Lily asks. Gabriel says yes, "we're in for a night of it".¹⁸ He asks Lily if she will marry the young man she is presently seeing. This personal intrusion annoys Lily's sense of independence and she responds sharply. It unsettles Gabriel, he has misjudged her. He is "discomposed by the girl's bitter and sudden retort".¹⁹ It casts a gloom over him, dispelled by arranging his cuffs and the bows of his tie.²⁰ Again, he transfers his discomfort to his attire. Lily is not the traditional female he is expecting; she is something new to him and she draws him out of complacency.

Because the weather is bad, Gabriel and Gretta will not be going home after the party. They will go instead to a hotel because they can afford this luxury. After the winter weather of a previous party, Gretta caught a cold. Gabriel believes she is fragile and susceptible to illness in inclement weather. Gabriel jokes that Gretta would "walk

¹⁷ Ibid., 154.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 155.

²⁰ Ibid.

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home in the snow it she were let".²¹ He believes she is not sensible and knowing better, he must protect them both against the elements. Reference to the galoshes, diving suit and the hotel stay act to reinforce Gabriel's desire to keep himself and his wife away from the cold.

Teasing is intensified at the party by remarks from Miss Molly Ivors, Gabriel's old friend from school. She has a frank direct manner which unnerves Gabriel. She suggests he is losing his "Irishness"; that he is becoming a "west Briton"²²; bland and boring, dead to the rebellious nature of present-day Ireland, and that he writes for a British supported "rag" newspaper.²³ The conversation challenges Gabriel's sense of decorum. It surprises him that Molly should shame him because of his choice of employment. Miss Ivors independence and her self-assurance clearly unsettles him. She rebuffs his offer to be a gentleman and walk her home. Like Lily, her attitude frightens Gabriel in its non-conformity to his sense of traditional behavior. When women are not predictable, Gabriel loses his way.

In his discomfort, he turns to the window, back to the weather. Weather is a place where modern science can be applied and measured. Precipitation under cold conditions equals snow. Gabriel is looking for this kind of pattern in his social interactions but falls short. Gabriel's warm trembling fingers tap the cold pane of the window "How pleasant it would be to walk out alone".²⁴ He looks for escape from the social confines of the party. He wants to experience the solitude and beauty of a landscape blanketed in fresh snow. He visualizes a bright cap of snow on the

²¹ James Joyce. *"Dubliners": Norton Critical Editions*, 156.

²² *Ibid.*, 163.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ James Joyce. *"Dubliners": Norton Critical Editions*, 166.

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Wellington monument, a protective cover over a symbol of British authority. He seeks the peace and quiet of a natural setting, a comfortable place without judgment.

As the party continues, Joyce delves further into Gabriel's relationship with his wife. Gabriel sees her on the stairs and is moved by her beauty and her ability to touch him emotionally. She appeals to his senses just like the scene outside the window; the white blanketed landscape. He looks at her and marvels at the "grace and mystery in her attitude".²⁵ Her beauty is a comforting reinforcement of his life choices, much like his attire and his education. He knows she will change and age just as he is aging. She will eventually end up looking like Aunt Julia with grey hair and "flaccid face"²⁶ or Aunt Kate with "puckers and creases like a shriveled red apple".²⁷ He pushes these unsettling thoughts away concentrating on her present appeal. He wants to voyeuristically paint her image to freeze his view of her in this fleeting moment.

Unfortunately, time and place cannot be frozen. Not his wife's beauty or the present state of Ireland. Gabriel's resistance will not alter the encroachment of modern life. He says in his speech to the guests "I will not let any gloomy moralizing intrude upon us tonight".²⁸ He envisions this moment as a break from the greater impact of urban living, the "bustle and rush of ... routine".²⁹ He wants to hold on to the traditions of his Irish past and his religious upbringing but understands the need for change. He makes fun of the political state of Ireland, Catholic repression and the inability of the church to move into the present. There is a dinner table discussion of Trappist austerity,

²⁵ Ibid., 182.

²⁶ Ibid., 155.

²⁷ Ibid., 156.

²⁸ James Joyce. *"Dubliners": Norton Critical Editions*, 177.

²⁹ Ibid., 177.

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how the monks sleep in their coffins, the conclusion being “wouldn’t a comfortable spring bed do them as well as a coffin?”.³⁰ Later, Gabriel remembers his grandfather’s horse running around the statue of King Billy, another protestant historic figure, taking the indignant very pompous old gentleman with him. Gabriel retells the story while walking in a circle in his new galoshes, His actions reinforce the absurdity of the time but within his story is a kernel of reality, a measure of concern for Irish and British relations. Gabriel sees the need for change but also mourns the loss of past tradition. It all leaves him feeling helpless and unsettled.

The party comes to a close and Gabriel and Gretta prepare to leave. They step into the “murky air”.³¹ The snow is now slushy underfoot. Gretta holds her skirt up and ventures forward. She “seemed to him so frail that he longed to defend her”.³² He thinks of her “warm” palm in this “cold” place, her face “fragrant in the cold”.³³ He thinks of “the years of their dull existence” but wants to also embrace “their moments of ecstasy”.³⁴ His cold and warm thoughts another comparison of opposites. He watches a horse pass “wearily under the murky morning sky...dragging his old rattling box”.³⁵ It is like a reminder of life and its baggage. He longs for Gretta’s distraction, her comforting warmth, but when they are alone, she is distant, melting away from him like the early morning snow. Similar to the encounters with Lily and Miss Ivors, his wife’s

³⁰ Ibid., 175.

³¹ Ibid., 185.

³² Ibid.

³³ James Joyce. *“Dubliners”*: Norton Critical Editions, 185

³⁴ Ibid., 186.

³⁵ Ibid.

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temperament perplexes him. Her mind is occupied with another time and place far removed from Gabriel.

By the story's conclusion, while Gretta sleeps, Gabriel mentally steps back through his complicated evening coming to rest in a space of new self-awareness, conscious of an existence that is "dissolving and dwindling"³⁶ just as he sees Irish life on the whole, dissolving. His thoughts are interrupted by "a few light taps upon the pane",³⁷ Gabriel turns to the window. It had begun to snow again. It is fitting that the story concludes with the omnipresent falling snow. Joyce returns us to where the story began and thus, completes the weave of an intersecting Irish mendala. A past, present and future with a reminder that the snow was "general" in Ireland that day.

Bibliography

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³⁶ Ibid., 194.

³⁷ Ibid.