

My **mid-term 5-page prospectus** meant to forecast  
the gist of my 15-page final paper

Illuminating some of the imagery  
in Joyce's *The Dead*

It is my primary purpose to probe into the question whether the imagery used in this last piece of Joyce's constringent contributions to the sequence of "Dubliners" adds to a sense of "paralysis", 'futility', and pessimism in Gabriel Conroy, unquestionably the protagonist in this novella-like 'short story'.

The story completing and marking the final highlight in this superb flow of thematically interrelated stories is just this rich in images of differing kinds that I shall have to concentrate on just a few of them to point out the deeper meaning they have for the story as a whole.

From beginning to end there is a lot of play on the two-pronged cluster of light and darkness, shade and growth, day and night, which in turn is reflected and thus intensified by the geographical directions of 'east' and 'west'. It is this world of dualism, of polarity that pervades the whole 24 hour 'plot' in the narrative, largely conveyed to us through the eyes, the mind and senses (emotions) of Gabriel – explicitly through descriptive passages or implicitly, technically speaking, by means of frequent use of interior monologue laying bare to us what's going on in the mind and thus at the bottom of this person's soul.

Towards the end of the story, when the Christmas or New Year dance-party (in itself a turning point, symbolically) at the Morkans' is over, Gabriel has an 'epiphany'. This epiphany is related to his marriage which has become monotonous, vividless, scarily empty. What is it due to that his marriage to Gretta has drifted 'on the rocks', so to speak, without him being aware of it until he has this sudden, unexpected, unforeseeable insight into his life and what it has been like all the while? Gabriel can most certainly not be marked out as an insensitive man, unloving and inconsiderate to others. This becomes

clear in the brilliant speech he gives after the opulent dinner in gratitude to the “hospitality” of his relatives, the two Misses Morkan and their niece, the “Three Graces” as he apostrophizes them. Yet in a way he has perhaps been too introverted as far as his wife is concerned. Has there been a lack of love, a lack of feeling, real understanding for his wife? Has his relationship to Gretta consequently become ‘dead’ (worn out, threadbare, trodden down, senseless)? Gabriel’s awareness of her as a complete being - like a living piece of art eternally to be admired anew – has gone lost. And it is this ‘loss’ he has become conscious of in a last moment, the moment of his ‘epiphany’. What was the event disclosing to him that his wife had already been alienated from him? Was it a “dead” lad (> Michael Furey, his wife’s former adolescent lover) who brought him back to life, hopefully, for the story significantly finishes with an open ending? Does the insight he now gains at this decisive moment in his life in this dim lit room of a hotel have an impact on him so as to stir him up and make him re-consider his attitude to life, love and within this context to his wife? And is the ultimate question not, why had he been misguided in his assumptions on ‘love’? Should he have taken into regard the ‘past’ of his wife, i.e. what had formed, shaped her in terms of her character, her expectations and her view of life? And if so, what are the means or/and the images in which Joyce tries to bring this across to us?

The reason why Gabriel lives in a “thought-tormented” plight as if caught in a cataclysm between a world of “cold” and “snow” on the one side and one of “light” and “fire” on the other is intricate. It consists of an entanglement of various factors, some of which we can only surmise, presuppose or indirectly derive from dexterously schemed allusions and references (under the cover of some images) to other details of the story.

Again it is light, new light in which Gabriel finds his wife so attractive all of a sudden. What makes him see her completely new? Has she re-gained her youth(fulness), has she been born a new human being? What is it that gave her back her original beauty? Before Gabriel begins to reflect about this ‘cluster’ of questions, he is that much carried away by her charm and outer beauty that he wants to ‘devour’ her with his very instincts.

The (momentous?) sexual desire he unquestionably feels for her is boundless. Thus it is through his wife he feels born again. A miracle has taken place for him, too. The world has opened up to him again. Life has become worth living – through love. His marriage has been saved (if at all, that is). Like the “snow” outside, which hasn’t been there in Ireland for the last thirty years, his marriage has been ‘cold’, ‘dead’. Now – overwhelmed by a new feeling for his wife – he beseeches everyone (the porter of the hotel as well as Gretta herself) to take away any candle up the staircase and in the room of the hotel itself. It is in a dim lit room or rather in the dark he wants to re-unite with his wife. And at the same time he wants to find out about the mystery enshrouding her ‘abstractedness’ (“Why did she seem so abstracted?” he wondered on p. 156 in the Wordsworth Classics edition). Why was she not with him? Why was she not listening to him? What was it she was wrapped up in her mind with? What was she absorbed in so as not to be able to really communicate with him? Had their relationship – like the unusually cold winter outside – frozen to ‘death’?

Some such questions must have passed through Gabriel’s mind before ‘light’ fell upon him through what his wife confessed to him. An old Irish folk song (*The Lass of Aughrim*), which is a love ballad about a lass abandoned/left in the lurch (by the feudal lord who had fathered her), and which was sung at the party, had brought back to her recollections of the past. The song reminded her of a boy who used to sing that song too and who was in love with her (when being seventeen). All this had happened at Galway, a small village in the west of Ireland, where she used to stay with her grandmother. There was something inexplicable (about either of them) for which they had fallen in love with each other. And unlike Gabriel, this lad gave himself completely away to her. Though he was seriously ill, he came out to her right in the (cold +) rain just to see his beloved one. He obviously was prepared to sacrifice his life for her. He wholly dedicated himself to her in an unselfish, angel-like way (> cf. Gabriel, one of the archangels, wasn’t he? And here he was about to ‘fail’!?). Through ‘death’ he remained united to her. Thus he has lived on in the heart of Gretta, who herself had been able to live through this invisible link from the past. (This episode of ‘real love’ also fits in with Joyce’s theme of Christianity, which

is not only restricted to Ireland. It was Jesus who said, “ He who gives his life away for my sake will regain it.”)

In the light of the insight into this complex matter the question to rise for Gabriel is whether he will be prepared in the future to accept this kind of ‘humiliation’, of ‘defeat’ in as far as he has had (and will have) a ‘dead rival’ competing with him for the ‘possession’ of her not as a mere piece of property but her ‘love’ as a token of her favor for him/them. Will Gabriel be able to re-kindle a ‘fire’, a ‘light’ in the dawn of a new day (which is about to begin in the story, chronologically) to mend the broken relationship with his wife? Will he be able to foster new bonds in a new light, a light which accepts a person’s past, a past tied to history, religion, tradition each of us automatically inherited and has got to be conscious of?

The ‘light’ in the hotel room lit by a ‘candle’ can be extended into a broader line of similar images, all of which are intertwined with each other: Gabriel’s burning desire, which is like a ‘fire’, his enchantment (by his wife deep in his soul, the realm of his emotions uncontrolled by reason), leading to his ‘enlightenment’ (with emphasis on the mind), his ‘epiphany’ (sudden becoming aware of something he hadn’t recognized up to that point of time).

Parallel to this play on ‘dark’ and ‘light’ runs the emphasis on our cultural inheritance which we are meant to cherish. Joyce’s lesson evidently is that if we don’t pay heed to all that has formed/made us, we are doomed to a premature ‘death’ as becomes obvious in the relations Gabriel has/had to a) his wife, b) Lily, c) Miss Ivor.

As to Gabriel’s wife, she has a natural (down to earth, nature-related) sensitivity which Gabriel himself hasn’t become aware of all those years. What links her to Miss Ivor is also a sense of homeliness, a sense of feeling drawn to one’s origins, which in the case of Miss Ivor takes the shape or expression of ‘patriotism’, a longing, a quest, a search for one’s identity on the basis of common experience, a language (in that case ‘Gaelic Irish’), history, folklore, literature, art, all of which make up the ingredients of a tradition and

cultural 'treasure' shared by the people of one and the same 'nation'. It is against this foil of abstract values we have to see Miss Ivor's 'westbound' yearning (for a holiday in the west of Ireland, recurrently coming up in her at certain intervals), which transferred to Gretta assumes the evocation of Galway and the person of Michael Furey. I think the moral lesson Joyce wants to teach us in those examples and cross-cultural references to art, music and literature in a universal respect (cf. the Italian opera "Lucrezia Borgia"; the repeated quoting of "Caruso", an outstanding, famous tenor of his time) is that if we don't stick to the 'spiritual' values we inherited from the past (i.e. our ancestors and their achievements) we lose touch with life, we become 'dead'. We shrink to mechanically functioning beings, who might be categorized as (the) 'living dead' - if I may use an oxymoron to express this idea.

The very fact that Gabriel has been dead for quite a long time becomes evident in the "galoshes" he wants Gretta to wear. Whereas Gretta is not afraid of the snow and the little bit of cold naturally connected with it, Gabriel is scared of falling victim to it. He shies back from a real touch with life. He uses galoshes not just because they are fashionable so as to show off with a good-looking wife at such a Christmas dinner and dance party, but to make sure against the uncertainties of life. He thinks in terms of a life insurance as if there was such a thing against the imponderable in life. Unlike young Michael Furey who exposed himself to rain (and bad weather conditions in general), who risked his life out of true love for Gretta, Gabriel is not prepared to take any risks so as not to endanger himself.

Undeniably this motif of 'going west' means 'going home'. West is where the sun sets. West is where Ireland is - for Miss Ivor, and west is where the dead are buried for Gretta. The last character in this 'triangle' we have to cast some light upon within this perspective is Lily. Even she was underrated, treated 'patronizingly' and thus condescendingly by Gabriel. On the one hand he sees her beauty and wants to make her compliments, but somehow he is very awkward in his demeanor towards her. He doesn't perceive a 'flower' in her, which her very name suggests, maybe a flower to blossom and

bloom at Easter, the time of Christ's resurrection, the seasonal re-birth of nature and in unison with this Gabriel's own 'coming back to life'. In what Lily retorts him with, Gabriel does not recognize a hint, clue, allusion as to where he as a 'man' might be misguided (> an egotist): "The men that is now is only all palaver and what they can get out of you." (p.129)

Yet there is still some hope for Gabriel to win back his wife and to unite with her in true love. This is superbly expressed in the final paragraph concluding the story. Just as the snow is 'falling faintly', tapping on the window pane, just as landscape outside and men inside the hotel room are put under a 'warm cover', a blanket so to speak, the veil of snow does not separate Gabriel from his wife entirely. One might just as well see the snow as a means of bringing people together again. The snow will melt away, spring time will come, and 'lilies' will arise. This 'cover-scene' towards an early morning that will take the night away is perhaps the moment when things begin to 'dawn' upon Gabriel (this stubborn archangel), when a 'revelation' takes place, an 'apocalypse' through an epiphany in him.

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My tutor's in-depth + pretty intense criticism of this, a comment that proved very helpful when I went about transforming and extending the 'prospectus' into the final paper:

You do a fine job of noticing details in the story, and in exposing their significance – for example your evocation of Gabriel's epiphany with his uncle seems particularly sensitive. I worry about the conclusion though. The notion that the moral lesson is that we must stick to the spiritual values inherited from the past requires that one see Gabriel as a hopeful figure, rather than as something of a tragic one. This seems to be a leap. So much of Gabriel's life seems set – he will not visit the west, he will give his speech at the party every year – that to see this is an epiphany seems a bit contradictory (or, as an epiphany that will tend to action; Gabriel had his chance for "action", and it didn't suit him). Joyce

passionately rejects the spiritual values of Ireland's past – have Ulysses, rather than an indigenous myth – so I see no reason to think that he feels it must be recaptured.

When your view is placed next to the other side, I think we get a more complete picture. The part is compelling – you are right I think when you suggest Gabriel suffers a defeat, and that the past is indeed compelling. But it is precisely this tension – the past is also tragic and, as funny, romantically ineffectual – that lends Gabriel to stay in a kind of suspended unhappiness and Joyce to leave. The Dublin of the previous stories is a Dublin inhabited by the dead and buried – buried in conventions, religion, the past – and the characters long to break free. Gabriel did not. So, the snow promises what you say, but doesn't come through – even in its ambiguity.

How will this become a larger paper? Are you going to explore the relationship to a national past in several writers? It is a good subject. Perhaps reading Orwell's relationship to the “national past” – his romanticizing of it by making the present so negative – will cast Joyce's de-romanticization in a different light.