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Death and Irish Revivalism in “The Dead”

The ambiguous ending of James Joyce’s “The Dead” has long been disputed by critics and readers alike. The very night of the scene in question, Gabriel Conroy has discovered his wife Gretta’s secret passion for a young Irishman (Michael Furey) who she knew when she was a young woman and who suffered a romantic death on her behalf. This revelation for Gabriel is the culmination of a frustrating series of encounters and experiences that night with people who are similarly stuck in the past. Ultimately, with his nostalgia-stricken wife asleep on the hotel bed and the snow falling outside the window in the background, Gabriel Conroy comes to the frightening epiphany that his wife’s obsession with the past and with her dead lover will forever outweigh her appreciation and regard for him. He realizes that Gretta will never love him as much she loves Michael Furey unless he too gives his life for her. I argue that in this intense moment of melancholy musing Gabriel comes to the decision to kill himself and join “the vast hosts of the dead” (Joyce 194) as the only way he knows to achieve the same exalted status in Gretta’s mind and heart which Michael Furey enjoys. I further propose that Joyce intends to paint Gabriel—in his relationship with Gretta and others in the story—as a victim of Irish Revivalism, a backward-looking brand of Irish nationalism that the author rejected.

Though the final pages of the story are rife with ambiguity, the physical elements and the language employed make it clear that Gabriel has chosen to end his life. Jim LeBlanc, author of “‘The Dead’ Just Won’t Stay Dead,” analyzes this scene and declares that “[t]he atmosphere of

the story's conclusion suggests suicide, at least metaphorically" (LeBlanc 27). By atmosphere we may infer not just the general effect or tone of the conclusion for the reader but also the physical atmosphere of the scene. The snow "falling faintly" outside of Gabriel's window carries a powerful presence and serves as a symbol of cold and lifelessness (Joyce 194). While rain is a life-giving force to the world and a harbinger of springtime, snow more often than not is a killing force, curtailing plant life for the duration of the winter season and blanketing the land in arctic chill. It is when Gabriel is watching the falling snow that he decides that "[t]he time [has] come for him to set out on his journey westward" (194). This phrase, "to set out on his journey westward," is a figurative expression insinuating that Gabriel has begun to effectuate his own death. The *Oxford English Dictionary* explains that the expression "to go west" means "to die," "with reference to the west as the place of the setting sun and perhaps also to its identification (*esp. in Celtic traditions*) as the abode of the dead (*OED*, emphasis added). I argue that the Celtocentric language of Gabriel's suicidal decision further reveals his reasons for coming to said decision (something which I will discuss more later on). Furthermore, the *OED* notes that the use of the phrase in "[this] sense became widespread during the First World War (1914-1918)," which is significant because "The Dead" was published with the *Dubliners* collection in 1914 (*OED*). So while it may be difficult for us today to fully grasp the insinuation of Gabriel's decision to go west, this is a phrase which would have been well understood by the readership of that time period. Lastly, the sentence in which Gabriel muses that he "[b]etter pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dismally with age" (Joyce 194) is particularly instructive. He is clearly processing and learning from Michael Furey's story and comes to the conclusion that he should imitate Michael Furey and die (relatively) young.

Knowing that Gabriel does decide to kill himself, it is important to understand why he does so: overwhelmed by having to compete with the specter of Michael Furey for Gretta's affections, Gabriel feels the only way he can win over Gretta is to imitate Michael Furey and "pass boldly" into the next life (Joyce 194). LeBlanc in his analysis sets the stage for the circumstances which lead him to make this decision, saying "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" (LeBlanc 27). It seems to be clear to Gabriel that he cannot in fact go on with his life as he has before, and that even in so doing he would forever be second-place to Michael Furey. Looking at his wife on the bed, the story reads that Gabriel "thought of how she who lay beside him had locked in her heart for so many years that image of her lover's eyes when he had told her that he did not wish to live" (Joyce 194). Truthfully, the painful recurring thought that one's spouse loved another would be hard for anyone to live with. Gabriel's frustration is understandable, and is certainly a large factor in his decision although it is clear too that what Gabriel is doing is not just for his sake but for Gretta's too. The author Willard Potts calls attention to the fact that while Gretta is still awake and bawling, Gabriel "abandons his desire to overmaster Gretta and quietly withdraws, 'shy of intruding on her grief' (*D* 221)," showing some degree of concern for her well-being and acknowledgement of how hard it must be for her to be confronted about her painful memory of Michael Furey (Potts 97). Potts further argues that "[i]n this self-sacrificing gesture, motivated by love, Gabriel imitates Michael Furey" (97). If anything, his own suicide will be even more of a "self-sacrificing gesture" on her behalf, and if Gretta responds in any way similar to the way she responded at Michael Furey's death, Gabriel's own self-sacrifice will leave an indelible mark on her heart. It is this selflessness on Gabriel's part which informs the

statement that “[g]enerous tears filled Gabriel’s eyes” (Joyce 194, emphasis added). Who is being generous towards? It seems that it is Gabriel’s belief that what he is doing is *generous* as far as Gretta is concerned because he is doing without love what Michael Furey once did for her with love; as he says, regarding Michael’s devotion, “[h]e had never felt like that himself towards any woman but he knew that such a feeling must be love” (194). While it is debatable that what degree Gabriel’s suicide should be considered “generous,” it is clear that whatever the case he did it for Gretta.

Before going on to discuss how Gabriel’s decision to commit suicide serves as a commentary on Irish Revivalism, I will first briefly discuss this movement and what Joyce believed on the matter. In discussing Irish Revivalism it should be noted, as Len Platt writes in his volume on Joyce, that “nationalism and revivalism are not necessarily the same thing” (Platt 7), although as Gregory Castle has stated, “[t]he literary and cultural Revival in late 19th-century Ireland... [has a] close association with nationalism” (Castle, *Irish Revivalism*, 291). One helpful definition of Revivalism, also from Castle’s book, states: “Irish Revivalism has long been understood as possessing a naïve and nostalgic view of the past, one that hides a desire to restore and preserve a pristine pre-colonial Celtic culture” (*Irish Revivalism*, 291). It is this “naïve and nostalgic view of the past” which Joyce so fervently disagrees with and which he takes aim at throughout his works, not just in “The Dead.” Later on I will discuss how the characters beyond Gabriel in the story reflect this view as well as an affinity for “pre-colonial Celtic culture.” As for Joyce himself, his personal views on Revivalism are (perhaps uncommonly for him) quite clear thanks to a 1907 speech he gave in Italy entitled “Ireland, Island of Saints and Sages,” as well as other surviving letters he wrote. In this speech, Joyce suggested that nationality was no more than “a convenient fiction like so many others to which the scalpels of present-day

scientists have given the coup de grâce” (Loeffler 34). On other occasions he referred to Revivalism as a “political delusion” (34) and an “anemic sham” (Potts 85). Joyce did not hate Ireland, nor was he opposed to some other forms of Irish nationalism. The problem he saw in Revivalism was that the adherents of that movement were too stuck in the past, too caught up in that “convenient fiction” (Loeffler 34) they were creating for themselves about Ireland’s past glory. Concerned that Ireland, unlike others, “as a whole... had not leapt at a bound from tradition to modernity” (Castle, *Modernism*, 1), Joyce favored instead more proactive, modern efforts to make Ireland great. In that same 1907 speech, Joyce declared that “the Irish must redefine themselves as a nation resistant to the ‘stronger race’ of the British Empire or they will disappear off the far edge of Europe” (Gupta 266). Indeed, “[i]n imagining Ireland’s emergence from colonial rule, Joyce look[ed] beyond the snow-covered West of Ireland” looking outside for the motivation to progress rather than looking inside and failing to embrace modernity (268). These are qualities and agendas that we will see reflected in Gabriel.

Clearly, Gabriel’s being driven to decide to kill himself is not just about a man and wife in a hotel room; rather, his self-damaging behavior spurred by the attitude of those who surround him is reflective of the damages that Revivalist thinking was doing within Irish society. Throughout the story Gabriel, like Joyce, “looks beyond... Ireland,” and in so doing stands in contrast to the other characters in the story who are stuck in the past. Much has been made about his desire to go to “France or Belgium or perhaps Germany” rather than visit within Ireland (Joyce 164), and for this he is attacked by Revivalist thinkers like Miss Ivors. When confronted about his failure to keep up with his “own language,” the Irish language (164), Gabriel responds that that is not in fact his language, though he is a native of Ireland; interestingly, Joyce in one of his letters once wrote that “[i]f the Irish programme did not insist on the Irish language... I

suppose I should call myself a nationalist” (Loeffler 36). Gabriel’s cosmopolitanism is well-documented, as is the Revivalism of other characters, particularly Miss Ivors. Nikhil Gupta has observed in the case of Miss Ivors that “[a]s with the ‘Irish device’ she wears on her collar, her rhetoric echoes a Revivalist cultural nationalism (after all, it was she that was attacking Gabriel on the subject of his foreign interests and appreciation for the Irish language) (Gupta 280).

Willard Potts further says that Molly Ivors’ “university education, interest in Irish, and association with the middle or upper middle class were typical of Catholic Revivalists” and that the fact “that ‘she did not wear a low-cut bodice’ points to the Puritanism associated with Revivalists” (Potts 85). Miss Ivors is so blatant in the expression of her love for all things Irish that Gabriel is led to ask himself, “[w]as she sincere? Had she really any life of her own behind all her propagandism?” (Joyce 167). The answer in both cases seems to be ‘no,’ and in any case, the insinuation is clear that if Miss Ivors did not, in fact, have “any life of her own,” she must be dead, an interesting comment on the lifelessness of the Irish Revivalist movement and its adherents. The presence and description of characters such as Miss Ivors is important because it sets the stage of the anachronistic society that Gabriel must live in. The old fashioned people that surround him, his aunts Kate and Julia included, no doubt frustrate Gabriel and push him to the breaking point (recall that in his conversation with Miss Ivors he becomes “heated” and “retorts... suddenly, ‘I’m sick of my own country, sick of it!’” (Joyce 165)), although it is not until his discussions with his wife that he is thrown over the edge and chooses to act drastically.

In the end, when Gabriel thoughtfully recognizes that the “snow [is] general all over Ireland,” he is referring to the cold and lifelessness that afflicts the entire nation, as evidenced by many of the people who surround him (194). This is what he has fallen prey to, a society and more than anything a wife who embodies that cold, lifelessness, and unyielding nostalgia for the

past. As I remarked earlier it is for this reason that for his death he uses the Celtocentric language of journeying westward, indicating that his fate is that of all of Ireland, to lose your identity and (in more than one sense) to die and go westward (194). As Nikhil Gupta so deftly puts it, Joyce uses a “spectral landscape,” and I would argue too spectral language, in Gabriel’s epiphany scene “in order to convey his sense of the failure of an Irish nationalist project in ‘The Dead’” (Gupta 265).

To further this discussion of Revivalist qualities in the characters in the story and their effect on Gabriel, we can look to numerous musical examples in the story. Music is a common theme in all of Joyce’s writings, and in this story plays a particularly important role for, as Willard Potts writes, “Revivalists bemoaned the disappearance of such things as the Irish language, Irish games, and Irish music” a longing which is apparent in numerous instances (Potts 95). First, the guests at the party express a longing for the past as they talk together about how the old singers and musical groups are superior to any contemporary performer (even with a contemporary singer, Mr. Bartell D’Arcy present in the conversation!). The guests swap stories of the past and reminisce about how “[t]hose were the days... when there was something like singing to be heard in Dublin” and complain how “they never play the grand old operas now” (Joyce 173). When Mr. D’Arcy hopefully suggests, “I presume there are as good singers today as there were then,” his comment is shot down by a defiant “Where are they?” (173). While Gabriel does not seem to get caught up in such conversations, he nevertheless has the misfortune of being a part of this society which discredits anything modern and clings to the past. On this same subject of musical nostalgia, Gretta is an excellent example of Irish Revivalist modes. As the party begins to break up, Gabriel spots his wife quietly listening to an old tune on the piano, and mentally labels the scene “*Distant Music*” (182). He asks himself, “what is a woman standing on

the stairs in the shadow, listening to distant music, a symbol of[?]" (182). I believe that Gretta in this scene is a symbol of Irish Revivalism, for not only is she hearkening back to the past rather than creating new music (something which Joyce, I'm sure, would have preferred), but she is characterized as being distant. This can be viewed both as her being distant from Gabriel emotionally and as Irish Revivalist thought being distant from modernity and distant from what is happening now. Of course, I believe the two perspectives are intimately related, especially as we have already established that Gabriel in many ways represents modernity in the story. It is Gretta's distance from the present and from her husband that create the conflict in the story and ultimately drive Gabriel to decide to kill himself. Lastly, "The Lass of Aughrim" carries special meaning in the context of the story and what it has to say about Irish Revivalism. The song clearly has a special meaning for Gretta as it is a song that young Michael Furey used to sing to her years ago. The line "the rain falls on my heavy locks" no doubt reminds her of the night that Michael stood there in the rain for her, wishing not to have to leave her side (183). Indeed, the song sends Gretta into a fit of tears later on when she is alone with Gabriel (189-190). "The Lass of Aughrim" is yet another thing which Gabriel is unable to share with Gretta as it is something from her past that he will never be able to understand or share in. Furthermore, the song carries with it too certain old Irish overtones that would have made it well-appreciated among Irish Revivalists. As Nikhil Gupta points out, "Gretta hearing 'The Lass of Aughrim' recalls to her not just Michael Furey but 'associations with the final defeat of Catholic Ireland at the Battle of Aughrim'" (Gupta 270). The ballad itself, he goes on to say, "suggests an Irish inability... to complete a national destiny for themselves" (284-285). Looking to the past as they do, the Irish people have nothing with which to construct their identity except defeat and failure, much as Gretta in turning to the past can only find loss and heartbreak. Gretta holds on to the song as she

holds on to Michael Furey and both, now long gone, serve as symbols to her; as Vincent Cheng writes, “Aughrim... like the hapless Lass in the song, becomes itself a poignant symbol of... [the] murdered Irish past, the dead, the bodies of, as Yeats wrote in his verse play *Purgatory*, ‘long ago / Men that had fought at Aughrim and the Boyne” (Cheng 359). We see how music plays a powerful part in the lives of the characters in addition to its role in the minds of Irish readers who too would have identified with the songs and perhaps also with the nostalgia for long-gone performers.

Finally, it should be clear that “The Dead” does not exist in a vacuum, nor does its message on Irish Revivalism. In analyzing the story and its due criticism for this theme it was impossible not to find parallels in other of Joyce’s works. For one thing, this topic is present in another tales of the *Dubliners* collection, and as Potts indicates, “the Revival is simply alluded to in “A Little Cloud”; and then later on, in “A Mother” and “The Dead,” it appears as a major subject (Potts 68). *Dubliners* is meant to be studied and read as a progressive story collection, rather that progression be from childhood to adulthood or from a small degree of political awareness to a great degree. It is clear that “The Dead,” as the culminating story of the collection, is the pinnacle story in this political progression and in the pervasive nature of this theme within the plot and characters of the story. Loeffler says it best when he remarks:

Joyce’s critique of Revivalism in ‘The Dead’ is considerably more complex than that in ‘Ivy Day’ or ‘A Mother.’ In its portrayal of the coercive force of the Gaelic revival and the widespread idealization of Gaelic-speaking Western Ireland, ‘The Dead’ constitutes *Dubliners*’ subtle, culminating repudiation of Irish cultural nationalism. (Loeffler 50)

This “subtle, culminating repudiation” is not mere coincidence nor is it simply an interesting anecdote on an entertaining short stories; rather, I believe, that Joyce puts “The Dead” in this

position to firmly place his repudiation and warning of what he considered to be a harmful form of Irish nationalism. We should note too that the ending of the story is something of a culmination of the culmination itself, and Gabriel's decision to kill himself is the climax of this entire collection. Finally, the message that this decision sends—that Revivalism is killing Ireland—becomes the message of the entire collection.

After all, we must ask ourselves who are “the dead” in this story? The dead are all those in Ireland who are forever looking to the past and who fail to live in the present. They are, in effect, “perished alive,” as Gretta is described at one point in the story (Joyce 153). This expression carries the same irony as is found in the term “Revivalism,” a movement with a misleading name as it carries with it nothing but dead traditions and, at least in the context of this story, dead Irishmen. I believe that Joyce did want to see his nation of Ireland revive and that “The Dead” is an attempt to show people what really must be done to achieve that. “Rather than create a romanticized form of Irish nationalism focusing on the grave of Michael Furey,” as Gretta and the others do, “Joyce reminds his readers of the obstacles and pitfalls of nation-building by alluding to [the grave],” ultimately the grave of Gabriel Conroy (Gupta 272). Gabriel is the victim of the antiquated attitudes of the Irish Revivalism and in finding it impossible to live within a society which is so dead he too is pressured to succumb and join “the vast hosts of the dead” (Joyce 194), a death which he sees all around him. In Gabriel we see the fulfillment of Joyce's injunction: “[i]f she [Ireland] is truly capable of reviving, let her awake, or let her cover up her head and lie down decently in her grave forever” (Gupta 280). Joyce could only hope to be able to see Ireland awake and truly revive rather than go the way of Gabriel and perish.

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