In “The Dead,” Joyce portrays marriage differently from what certain scholars cite as his traditional view of marriage. Joyce’s portrayal of marriage is often seen as a transaction, as Gerald Doherty notes when he views Doran as “the unwitting victim” (473) of whom Mrs. Mooney is “requiring marriage as a necessary reparation for Doran’s transgression (his seduction of Polly)” (474) in Doherty’s analysis of “The Boarding House.” Janine Utell then notes of Joyce’s conceptions of marriage, “[Joyce] sought a transcendent, soul-merging union— not a connection formed through exchange and use” (1) further exemplifying the common conception of Joyce’s view of marriage as a transaction. However, in “The Dead,” rather than portraying marriage as “a connection formed through exchange and use” (Utell 1), Joyce portrays marriage as death. Society then refuses to acknowledge this link between marriage and death, preferring to romanticize marriage. In the end, Gabriel must confront the impossibility of society’s idealized form of marriage, an ideal that refuses to acknowledge the link between marriage and death. Gabriel must allow society’s image of marriage to die if he is to have any hope of moving forward in the marriage he finds himself in at the end of the story, a different marriage from the one he believes exists between himself and Gretta for most of the story. Throughout “The Dead,” Joyce portrays marriage as death, as is shown through allusions to death and marriage in plays,
art, and music, the fates of the only married sister and brother, and Gabriel’s and Greta’s marriage. In short, Joyce’s portrayal of marriage as death through allusions, the fates of married characters in “The Dead,” and Gabriel’s and Greta’s marriage, shows the ways in which society then, and now, romanticizes marriage, even if marriage is, as Joyce believed it to be, death.

Joyce portrays marriage as death through allusions to music, plays, artwork, and people, all of which society then popularizes. Zack Bowen notes Joyce’s continual use of music to portray deeper themes in his stories when he shows “the memory of” Bob Doran in Ulysses prompting the main character, Bloom, to connect the Irish song “The harp that once through Tara’s halls” to Doran in a way that portrays Doran’s “following the ritual Irish trek from innocence to alcoholism.” This in turn contributes in Joyce’s portraying, “drunkenness [as] a national [Irish] tragedy” (118-119). Rather than focusing on Bob Doran and Ireland’s drinking problem, we see Joyce use Julia to connect marriage and death through a reference to a song in “The Dead.” Gabriel predicts his aunt’s death at the end of the story with, “Poor aunt Julia! She too would soon be a shade…He had caught that haggard look upon her face for a moment when she was singing Arrayed for the Bridal” (Joyce 193). According to the Norton edition of Dubliners, this is “a song arranged by George Linsley, based on an aria in the opera The Puritans… In the opera, the widow of the recently executed King Charles I, Henrietta of France, is saved by a royalist cavalier whose veiled bride suggests to him a disguise for the queen’s escape” (Norris 167). Here, a song with a title evoking the image of marriage, the plot of which involves a soon-to-be bride saving a widow, is already strongly linked to death, especially through the inclusion of the topic of regicide (the murder of a monarch), and marriage. Then, at the end of the story, Gabriel’s prediction of his aunt’s death is linked to the time when she sings this song about death and marriage (Joyce 193). This song, with its tragic associations and its
prompt of Gabriel’s sad prediction, is tragic. However, in “The Dead,” Julia’s audience loves her performance; in fact, before Gabriel reveals the premonition he receives during Julia’s performance of “Arrayed for the Bridal,” “Gabriel applauded loudly with all the others at the close of the song” (Joyce 168). Therefore, society romanticizes both death and marriage through popularizing a work strongly linked to both, but it also refuses to acknowledge the true nature of either death or marriage in the work. The same portrayal of death and marriage, and society’s refusing to acknowledge the link, is seen when Gabriel describes the artwork in his aunts’ home.

Pictures, and the stories they represent, found in Gabriel’s aunts’ home further show the link between marriage and death. *Romeo and Juliet*, well-known for the demise of its two protagonists shortly after their ill-fated marriage, is featured in “a picture of the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*” (Joyce 161). Even with the tragic fate of Romeo and Juliet after their marriage, society romanticizes this tragedy, as is seen with the artist’s choice to portray the balcony scene rather than the scene where the young married couple commits suicide. Then, the next piece of art that illuminates the link between marriage and death is a “picture of the two murdered princes in the tower” “beside” the balcony scene picture (Joyce 161). Norris’s footnote illuminates the significance of this allusion with a historical explanation: “Edward V and his nine-year-old brother, Arthur, were imprisoned in the Tower of London after the clergy raised questions about the legality of their parents’ marriage” (161). Hence, a marriage contributed to the death of these two young princes just as it beckoned the end of Romeo and Juliet, yet it is not the princes’ parents’ wedding ceremony that is proudly displayed on a wall of Julia’s, Kate’s, and Mary Jane’s house. These allusions exemplify the darker aspects of stories involving marriage while also illustrating the ways in which society ignores the darker side of a story to
focus on the less complicated romance of a situation. After these allusions, Joyce references famous people and operas in “The Dead” to illustrate his complex view of marriage.

During the dinner at the sisters’ party, more allusions to death are seen. One such allusion is a reference to “Poor Georgina Burns,” as she is referenced at the dinner party. The Norton Critical Edition elaborates on why one might pity Miss Burns by revealing “… [she] appeared with the Carl Rosa Opera Company…[her] husband died suddenly about seven months before the time of [“The Dead”]” (Norris 173). For some reason, this fact isn’t illuminated in the dinner party conversation, but, rather, the presence of death, linked to marriage, is glossed over yet again.

Besides references to songs, pictures, and popular artists, Joyce uses allusions to operas to link marriage and death. Let Me Like a Soldier Fall, for which “an Italian tenor had sung five encores” (Joyce 173), is “Don Caesar’s aria in William Vincent Wallace’s Maritana, sung when he is given the opportunity to nobly die by firing squad, rather than ignobly by hanging, if he agrees to marry a veiled lady before his execution” (Norris 173). The man will still die directly after his nuptials. Dinorah, which Mr. Brown describes during the dinner scene as one of the “grand old operas” (Joyce 173), is about catastrophic events such as “natural disasters, supernatural forces, and madness” delaying the “marriage” of a “peasant girl” and a “goatherd” (Norris 173), further linking matrimony to disaster. Lucrezia Borgia, another “grand old opera” (Joyce 173), is at “it’s high point [with] Lucrezia’s announcement that coffins have been brought in for the banquet guests she just murdered” (Norris 173). The link between death and Lucrezia Borgia becomes Joyce’s link between death and marriage when one knows the real Lucrezia’s complicated history. According to Sarah Bradford, she was divorced, her husband was, likely falsely, charged with “impotence” and it was circulated that their “marriage had not been
consummated” (67) because of this. Then “within just over six months [she was] married for a second time” (66). There were even “accusations of incest” between Lucrezia and her father, the pope (16). Thus, the woman a popular play portrays as a murderess had a complicated history with marriage. These operas, like the other allusions to songs, marriage, and people, contain both marriage and catastrophe. Regardless of the portrayal of the death seen throughout these allusions, the characters in “The Dead,” and even people in the modern world, love these stories of tragedy and ruin. People endlessly romanticize Romeo and Juliet, and Mr. Brown himself lauds Dinorah’s and Lucrezia Borgia’s fame during the dinner party in “The Dead.” Society celebrates these tragedies, just as it celebrates marriage, but, even today, society also romanticizes these tragedies. After all, it isn’t Romeo’s and Juliet’s suicide that someone in Gabriel’s society portrays in a picture, rather, it’s the balcony scene. Joyce shows a seemingly negative view of marriage in “The Dead” since, as these allusions show, those who unite in matrimony are, in fact, directly linked to death. Society in “The Dead” then conveniently ignores this link, preferring to portray Romeo and Juliet as a romance instead of a tragedy.

Allusions to music, artwork, the famous, and operas throughout “The Dead” are not the only way Joyce portrays marriage as death throughout the story. The fates of married characters link marriage and death throughout the story as well. For example, further illuminating the link between marriage and death is Gabriel’s own mother. Even though she is never seen throughout the story, we know her cynical view of Gabriel’s marriage, Gabriel recounts her “sullen opposition to his marriage” (Joyce 162). Despite this opposition, she is the only married sister, “she married TJ Conroy of the Port and Docks” (156). As she is the only one of the sisters who is married, she is also the only one who is dead during “The Dead.” During the time of the story, she is referred to as “[Kate’s and Julia’s] dead elder sister” (154) in contrast to her two living,
single, sisters. Gabriel’s mother is not the only sibling who appears to have married. One line reveals that there was once a married brother when it references “the death of their brother Pat” (152). Presumably, this Pat is the father of Mary Jane since Gabriel never references her as a sister even though he mentions a brother (Joyce 162). Therefore, it is safe for the reader to assume the brother married before his death, and that Mary Jane is the product of the union. Once again, at first, marriage appears as a great option because society romanticizes it. After all, “[Kate] and Julia had always seemed a little proud of their serious and matronly sister” (162). Kate’s and Julia’s pride in “their…matronly sister” seems strange given that the “matronly” sister had a cynical view of marriage, as is seen in her response to Gabriel’s marriage to Gretta. Given Gabriel’s mother’s own cynical view of her son’s marriage, she doesn’t appear to romanticize marriage. However, society still romanticizes marriage through her, as her son and sisters show. Joyce clearly portrays marriage as far worse than single life, since Kate and Julia are alive while Gabriel’s married mother, and his uncle, are both among the dead. Here “The Dead” shows another way society romanticizes marriage, more so than those who are married, in this case. Gabriel’s mother and uncle are not the only characters who portray the complex side of marriage, or the only examples of the way society romanticizes those who are married. Gabriel’s and Gretta’s marriage shifts drastically when the image of Gretta that Gabriel possesses dies, and not just because of the tragic tale of Michael Furey.

Joyce portrays Gabriel’s and Gretta’s marriage as death from its very start through Joyce’s use of different seasons as the setting for Gabriel’s and Gretta’s early relationship, though the reader doesn’t realize this until “The Dead” is nearly at its end. Gabriel’s description of the beginning of his and Gretta’s marriage, perhaps even the honeymoon, reveals that it took place in the winter, as is shown by his series of recollections: “they were standing on the
crowded platform and he was placing a ticket inside the warm palm of her glove. He was standing with her in the cold, looking in through a grated window at a man making bottles in a roaring furnace. It was very cold. Her face, fragrant in the cold air…” (Joyce, 186). The winter is a season of little sunlight and life when the outside world is dead. Hence, Gabriel and Gretta began their marriage in a season of death and darkness. Winter certainly isn’t a time when “birds were twittering in the ivy and the sunny web of the curtain was shimmering along the floor” (Joyce 185) as occurs in a scene before Gabriel’s and Greta’s marriage on a “spring morning” (Joyce 192). In contrast to the death one associates with winter, spring is a time of life and light, and it’s interesting that Gabriel refers to this precise instant again, a time of spring and life, just before his image of Gretta dies.

Gabriel’s image of Gretta dies when he learns of her former suitor, Michael Furey. LeBlanc describes Gabriel’s view of Gretta after he learns of the existence of Michael Furey as a “realization- that Gretta is someone distinct from the imaginary other that the subject internalizes as the object of his or her own freely directed desire…” (33). I believe we can term Gabriel’s new knowledge as more than a “realization”; we can also term this moment as the death of the image of Gretta that Gabriel believes he is married to for most of “The Dead.” In fact, the connection Gabriel makes with the seasons and the story of Michael Furey is when Gretta’s image dies, illustrating the link Joyce creates between death and marriage once more. Gretta’s death in Gabriel’s eyes occurs when he learns of Michael Furey, the boy who, in Gretta’s own words, “died for [her]” (191). With the revelation of this courtship, which Gabriel never knew of either through his courtship of Gretta or through their years of marriage, the wife Gabriel knows is gone; the image he possesses of her is dead. Joyce shows the demise of this image first through the shift in seasons when Gabriel comforts Gretta as she finally tells him the tragic story
of Michael Furey and then through Gabriel’s actions, which mirror the shift in seasons, throughout Gretta’s tale. At first, just before Gretta begins her story, Gabriel thinks of, “caress[ing] Gretta’s first letter to him that spring morning” (192), as I mention above. Then Gretta begins her tale, and what season does it begin with? As Gretta recalls, “It was in the winter…” (192). Once again, Joyce uses winter to portray marriage as death as Gretta’s image dies with Michael’s tale.

As the winter is the perfect setting for the fate of Michael Furey, it is also the perfect setting for the death of Gabriel’s image of Gretta, a death which Joyce contrasts with the birth of Gabriel’s idea of her in the long past spring, when he received “her first letter” (192). With his new knowledge of the tale of Michael Furey, Gabriel’s Gretta is dead. Furthermore, when Gabriel first begins thinking of spring is just after he begins to “caress her hand” (192). However, after Gretta’s confession, “Gabriel held her hand for a moment longer, irresolutely, and then, shy of intruding on her grief, let it fall gently and walked quietly to the window” (193). Finally, the narrator notes, “[Gretta] was fast asleep” (193) reminiscent of a corpse in the slumber of death. Further illuminating the death of Gabriel’s Gretta in this scene is the 1967 Penguin edition of *Dubliners*. In this edition, before “She was fast asleep,” (223) there is a break in the text. This break could symbolize death, a cessation, not just in text, but in life as Gretta’s image dies. Then, in the Norton Critical Edition of *Dubliners*, when looking on Gretta from his place at the window Gabriel remarks, “He watched her while she slept as though he and she had never lived together as man and wife” (193). After winter overcomes spring, after he allows her hand to fall, Gabriel looks upon the sleeping Gretta as the stranger she now is to him. Janine Utell notes of marriage in Joyce’s works, “Thus for Joyce, marriage- and its dark margin, adultery- becomes a site instead for grappling with, confronting, facing, and ultimately
recognizing the other” (2). Through the death of Gretta’s image, Gabriel comes to realize his wife is a different Gretta than the one he believes in for most of the story. The image of what she has been throughout their marriage is dead. As a result, what other option does Gabriel have but to view this foreign Gretta as a stranger in the place of the dead image of his wife? Through this death Gabriel comes to understand Joyce’s own portrayal of marriage as death.

This circumstance in Gabriel’s life, realizing that his wife has a past that makes her different from the image he has erected of her, is applicable to Joyce’s life as well once we realize that a similar situation occurred between Joyce and Nora, who, while they were not married for a great deal of their relationship, lived like a married couple together and with children. Awakening came for Joyce while he was dealing with publishing *Dubliners*. A man called Cosgrave taunted “that Nora ‘had gone for walks in the darkness along the river bank with…himself’” (138). As Gabriel was angry when he first learned of Michael Furey, Joyce was furious with Nora, as was shown by Joyce “ask[ing] [Nora] if Georgie was his son” (McCourt 138). At first it may seem impossible to tie this into “The Dead” given that it occurred while *Dubliners* was being published. Regardless, Joyce clearly knew of a history between Nora and Cosgrave as McCourt notes, “Joyce…probably remembered Nora’s angry words to him in yet another of their rows- “Sure Cosgrave told me you were mad” (138) and Joyce was comforted when “Stanislaus…weighed in with evidence from Trieste that Nora had rebuffed Cosgrave in 1904” (138). Therefore, Joyce knew of Cosgrave before *Dubliners* was published and Cosgrave’s attempts to court Nora occurred before the publication as well. Hence, as Gabriel has the opportunity to do at the end of “The Dead,” Joyce needed to accept that Nora had a past and could not always appear as the Nora he imagined her to be; he needed to accept this new information about Nora, and allow his old image of her to die to continue on with his
relationship. Despite moving on from the shock of Cosgrave, Joyce and Nora were not married for many years after they first united. Perhaps Joyce was hesitant because of his belief that society made marriage superficial by refusing to acknowledge the link between marriage and death, as he shows through his personal letters and the character of Molly Bloom, which I will discuss now.

Thus far we have discussed how Joyce portrays marriage as death through allusions, the fates of Gabriel’s known married family members, and Gabriel’s own marriage. In addition to forging this link, Joyce criticizes the way society romanticizes marriage. Utell brings evidence forward of Joyce’s own disenchantment with marriage, even to Nora Barnacle, in a question he posed to his brother in a letter, “‘But why should I have brought Nora to a priest or a lawyer to make her swear away her life to me?’” (1). Here, we see Joyce’s view of marriage as death in his own life, “why should [he]…make [Nora] swear away her life to [him]?” (emphasis added), as “swear away her life” is reminiscent of surrendering one’s life, or death. In addition, we also see him mocking society’s view of marriage as a grand, necessary event. Rather than being some grand romantic event, marriage is simply, “[bringing someone] before a priest or a lawyer,” and, as Joyce poignantly phrases is, “Why…?” Society sets marriage up as a romantic ideal, but Joyce understands marriage to be death, as is further shown with his character Molly Bloom.

Joyce certainly critiques society’s portrayal of marriage when he contrasts it with the situation marriage puts some of his characters in. Shloss notes for Ulysses’ Bloom that Molly “would not have been allowed, even in cases of aggravated assault, to get a separation order; she would not have been given custody of Milly, had divorce been possible; she had no right to the money she earned by singing in concert, nor could she have invested money or held property in her own name” (537). In “Eveline,” Eveline’s mother endures marriage to a man with tendencies
towards alcoholism and violent tendencies, eventually extracting a promise that traps her daughter in the same situation (Joyce 30). Why romanticize a situation that does all of this to a woman? For Molly and Eveline’s mother, marriage is the death of freedom, but society still romanticizes marriage rather than acknowledging this link to death. Thus, Joyce portrays the way society makes marriage more superficial by refusing to acknowledge its link to death because, without acknowledging this link, society promotes the practice for something it is not. Society portrays marriage as a grand event rather than the death of freedom, or, by ignoring the link between death and marriage, prompts belief in the possibility someone might marry an image of someone and never watch that image shatter, as occurs in Gabriel’s own marriage. Viewing marriage as death at first appears as a grim outlook on marriage. Nevertheless, accepting the existence of change in a marriage over the course of time can help to transcend the superficiality society promotes with its idealized form of marriage.

Throughout “The Dead,” Joyce portrays a more complicated view of marriage than society’s romanticized version by using allusion, the fate of married characters, and even Gabriel’s and Gretta’s marriage; Joyce also critiques the ways in which society romanticizes marriage as they refuse to examine its relationship to death. Gabriel recognizes the death of his image of Gretta, a type of death Joyce faced as well with Nora, by the end of “The Dead”. Even though viewing marriage as death may at first appear as a rather depressing view, it’s similar to the hope that one sees in Gabriel’s ending remarks about death: “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” (194). Marriage is a relationship; it involves compromising and changing. In short, it requires an acceptance of death and change, and society makes marriage more superficial as it ignores this link. Gabriel confronts death in his own
marriage by the end of “The Dead,” and rather than ruining his marriage, there is hope that this confrontation will deepen the meaning of his marriage now that his false image of Gretta is dead. In the end, Joyce shows that it is better to accept the occurrence of death in marriage rather than refuse to acknowledge the connection in favor of society’s superficial view of marriage. Gabriel and Joyce both faced the superficial idea of marriage society promotes and were given the chance to transcend it through accepting marriage as death.
Works Cited


