



December 2018

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Dickerson, Noelle (2018) "Annunciation, Crucifixion, Resurrection: Christian Symbolism in Joyce's "The Dead";" *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol11/iss2/5>

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annunciation, crucifixion, resurrection

Christian Symbolism in Joyce's "The Dead"

Noelle Dickerson

From the beginning of "The Dead," published in 1914, James Joyce hinted to readers that the story is rich with biblical symbolism. He makes these symbolic intentions clear by setting the story during the Feast of the Epiphany, a holiday celebrating the visit of the wise men to the young Christ. Each story in *Dubliners* features an epiphany of sorts, and as the conclusion to the collection, "The Dead" and its setting promise an epiphany to complete the work and Joyce's message to Ireland. This setting also allowed Joyce to utilize Christian symbolism throughout the piece without it seeming out of place. As such, critics have explored the biblical implications of many aspects of "The Dead." Many have examined Gabriel and Michael's names, both in regard to characterization and biblical symbolism. Gabriel and Michael are both angels of high standing in the Bible, and there are multiple interpretations this relationship can give readers of "The Dead." In his essay, "Gabriel and Michael: The Conclusion of 'The Dead'," Florence Walzl examines this relationship in depth. He brings up many interesting points, such as the contrast between the progressive West and stagnant East and the literary implications of angelic symbolism. At one point in his analysis, Walzl recognizes Gabriel for his role as an angel of rebirth and renewal (29). He also astutely identifies Michael Furey as a symbol of Christ (27).

From these points, Walzl brings new light to the snow epiphany at the end of the story by arguing that Joyce offers “rebirth and renewal” for Ireland (31). However, what Walzl’s analysis does not do is connect this comparison with the other Christian symbolism apparent in the story. For example, he does not bring up Gretta as a symbol of the Virgin Mary. Furthermore, though he notes the Michael-Christ symbolism, he does not link this symbolism to the Annunciation, Crucifixion, or Resurrection. Additionally, C. Roldan Wagner argues that Gretta is a Marian figure, and the Annunciation appears symbolically through this connection. Again, however, Wagner does not connect the appearance of a Mary symbol to the other biblical symbolism in “The Dead.” I argue that James Joyce intentionally included representations of the Annunciation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection throughout “The Dead,” and that we must read these events in relation with each other in order to fully understand and interpret Gabriel’s snow epiphany. By examining the symbolism of Gabriel as Gabriel, Gretta as Mary, and Michael as Christ, we can interpret Gabriel’s snow epiphany as Joyce ending *Dubliners* with a sense of resurrection and rebirth for Ireland.

Given his name, Gabriel is the easiest character to identify as religious symbolism and thus tie to the Annunciation. The archangel Gabriel generally represents “God’s strength” (Schork 21). Fittingly, Gabriel Conroy’s obsession with strength can be seen throughout Joyce’s text. Whenever someone challenges his authority or power, it leaves him feeling helpless. When Lily does not take kindly to his advice, he takes it personally. He is “discomposed by the girl’s bitter and sudden retort. It had cast a gloom over him” (Joyce 155). Later, when Molly Ivors accuses him of being weak and a West Briton, his mind flies to ways to reassert his strength. He plans to regain his dominance by including hospitality in his speech, noting, “that was one for Miss Ivors,” wanting to put her back in her place (167). His obsession with strength again becomes clear as he lusts after Gretta. He thinks, “She seemed to him so frail that he longed to defend her against something” (185). Still later, “he longed to cry to her from his soul, to crush her body against his, to overmaster her” (189). Gabriel’s need for strength and dominance over others emphasizes the symbolic ties between him and “God’s strength,” the archangel Gabriel.

Furthermore, in occult Christianity, the angel Gabriel is associated with fire (Walzl). Gabriel Conroy constantly thinks in terms of fire, strengthening this tie. The most prominent example is while he is walking home after the

party and begins to lust after his wife. Almost every image in this scene has to do with fire. As he watches her on the stairs, he sees that the “flame of the gas lit up the rich bronze of her hair which he had seen her drying at the fire a few days before,” describing her with words like flame, bronze, and fire (Joyce 184). His memories of her “burst like stars” (185). One memory involves a man at a furnace, and Gretta’s question, “Is the fire hot, sir?” the memory of which sends a “warm flood” through Gabriel’s body, again using terms related to warmth and heat (186). He felt he had not “quenched [her] soul” (186). He constantly sees things in terms of heat and flames. Gabriel’s association with the fiery archangel Gabriel is subtly enhanced by this imagery, further solidifying Gabriel’s symbolic role as God’s angel. These ties strengthen Gabriel Conroy’s connection to the angel Gabriel, introducing Annunciation symbolism to “The Dead.” The most obvious role of Gabriel the archangel is that of a mouthpiece. Gabriel appears a total of three times in the canonical Bible. His most famous appearance is when he visits Mary in Galilee. The gospel of Luke says,

The angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, To a virgin...and the virgin’s name was Mary. And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women...And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus. (King James Version, Luke 1:26–28, 31)

Here, Gabriel announces the conception of the Christ child, informing Mary that she will bring him to earth. Mary’s cousin also receives an announcement, as Gabriel brings the message of Elisabeth’s conception to Zacharias: “there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord . . . the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John” (Luke 1:11–13). Gabriel is mentioned in only one other verse of the Old Testament, while telling Daniel of the arrival of the Messiah. We see from these instances that his primary role as an archangel is that of announcing new life and rebirth. Walzl also brings up this connection, saying of Zacharias, “to a man who was old and sterile and whose wife was barren, the angel Gabriel brought the promise of new life. Does this name symbolism suggest birth and renewal for Gabriel?” (Walzl 29). Walzl suggests that Joyce leaves the answer to this question

unclear. However, in this analysis Gretta's role provides convincing evidence that Joyce's use of Gabriel's renewal symbolism is intentional.

Gretta's clothing identifies her as a symbol of Mary. Where Gabriel is connected to one Annunciation figure through his nature, Gretta, his wife, is connected to Mary through her dress. When Gabriel sees her standing on the staircase, he can see the "terracotta and salmonpink panels of her skirt," two shades of red. Later he notes her "blue felt hat" (Joyce 182). Joyce's subtle use of color links Gretta visually with Mary. In most artistic depictions of the Virgin Mary, she is wearing red, blue, or a red robe with a blue mantle, and the blue is usually above the red. The colors signify her royalty, her elevated status, and her passion for Christ (Stokes). Gretta's blue hat and red skirt are positioned the same way as many portraits of Mary, visually linking the two.

This scene on the staircase has been argued to represent the Annunciation in more ways than one. As Gretta stands on the staircase, she "[leans] on the banisters listening to something." Gabriel, standing at the bottom of the stairs and slightly removed, watches Gretta as she listens to Mr. D'Arcy sing "The Lass of Aughrim," a song also about a lord-like figure and impregnation (Joyce 182). C. Roland Wagner argues that this moment of stillness represents the scene of the Annunciation. He suggests that D'Arcy represents "an image of the mysterious, bodiless voice of God the father" and later that he is "a stand-in for God the father, speaker of the 'word'" (454, 457). This is true in the sense that D'Arcy's song first places the thought of Michael Furey in Gretta's mind, evidenced when Gretta says, "I am thinking about that song, 'The Lass of Aughrim' . . . I am thinking about a person long ago who used to sing that song" (Joyce 190). Gretta first remembers Michael Furey, the Christ figure, in this Annunciation moment on the stairs. In other words, D'Arcy's song figuratively impregnates her. It sparks Gretta's memory, ironically fulfilling the image of the Annunciation even though Gabriel, the traditional messenger, knows nothing of Gretta's situation yet.

Gretta's role as Mary is further solidified as she explains her relationship with Michael Furey to Gabriel. When Gabriel finally learns of Michael Furey, he asks Gretta if she was in love with him. She responds, "I was great with him at that time" (Joyce 191), echoing almost exactly Luke 2:5 which states that Joseph went to Bethlehem "to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child." The phrase "great with child" refers to pregnancy, completing the imagery of Gretta pregnant

with the concept of Michael Furey. The parallel language also links Gretta to the Virgin Mary herself.

Gretta's ties with Michael Furey first suggest his role as a symbol of Christ. Michael Furey is commonly read as Michael the archangel. While this symbolism adds much to the story, his symbolic connections with Christ are too apparent to be disregarded. As Gabriel is "God's strength," Michael is "God's likeness" (Schork 21). This is first manifest in the evidence mentioned above. During D'Arcy's performance of "The Lass of Aughrim," a Marian figure figuratively conceives Michael. Gretta, as Mary, is constantly linked to being "great with" Michael. After the initial Annunciation, Michael is figuratively "born" when Gretta describes Michael to Gabriel. After Gabriel asks what she is thinking about, she replies, "It was a young boy I used to know . . . named Michael Furey. He used to sing that song . . . he was very delicate." She describes his life, saying she "used to go out walking with him" (190) and that he "was in the gasworks" (191). Having figuratively born the concept of Michael, Gretta explains his significance and gives him a chance to take hold on Gabriel.

Quickly, however, Gretta reveals that Michael has died. The scene describing his death is rich with Crucifixion symbolism. First, she says that Michael "died for [her]" (Joyce 191), and Gabriel later identifies that "such a feeling must be love" (194). In John 15:13, Christ states, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." This creates yet another tie between Michael and Christ; Michael died out of love for Gretta, just as Christ died out of love for mankind. Florence Walzl says, "To love a cause or a person more than life is the action of the hero and the God, and Michael is so identified" (27), asserting that Michael's love is his main identifier as Christ. The Christ symbolism is just as strong when Gretta describes Michael's last moments. He was "at the end of the garden . . . standing at the end of the wall where there was a tree" (Joyce 192). The garden represents the Garden of Gethsemane, where Christ spent the last hours before his death, just as Michael spent the last hours before his death waiting in Gretta's garden. The tree symbolizes the cross, the final moment for both Michael and Christ. As he reflects on the snow covering Ireland, "through Gabriel's mind runs the imagery of Calvary. He imagines the snow on . . . the crooked crosses and head-stones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns" (Ellmann 259). These images further utilize Crucifixion symbolism, with the crosses invoking the image of Christ's cross, the spears

representing the spear that pierced Christ's side, and the thorns symbolizing Christ's crown of thorns.

While Michael's primary symbolic role in the story is as a Christ figure, Joyce draws on traditional ideas of the archangel Michael to enhance his effect on the story, intertwining the two ideas. Where the angel Gabriel is associated with fire, the angel Michael is associated with water (Walzl). As Michael stands in Gretta's garden, he gets his "death in the rain" (Joyce 192). As he stands under the tree in his final moments, he is covered in rainwater. It is also notable that "The Dead" ends with all of Ireland covered in snow, or water. This snow, a projection of Michael Furey onto all of Ireland, is a type of resurrection. Michael, though once dead, was figuratively brought back to life by Gabriel, who only knew him after his death. Gabriel reflects on Michael's meaning for a while, noting that "a man had died for her [Gretta's] sake. It hardly pained him now to think how poor a part he, her husband, had played in her life" (Joyce 193). Michael is brought back as a chance for Gabriel to turn inward, to change. This representation of the Resurrection allows him to experience his own rebirth. He receives a reminder to look past himself and his needs. This is precisely what Gabriel does as he sees "himself as a ludicrous figure, acting as a pennyboy for his aunts, a nervous wellmeaning sentimentalist, orating to vulgarians and idealizing his own clownish lusts" (191). Only through Michael's, or Christ's, resurrection is this epiphany possible. As he observes the snow falling across the country, this chance at resurrection extends beyond Gabriel to all of Ireland.

One last, important function of the archangel Michael comes from ancient Christianity. There is a "very old tradition of Michael as the receiver of the souls of the dead" (Schork 20). Considering Joyce's title for the story, "The Dead," this fact becomes significant. As the last story in the *Dubliners* collection, "The Dead" is the last chance for Joyce to make a statement to the Irish people. He describes Dublin as paralyzed, its people inwardly dead. As Michael is projected to all of Ireland through snow symbolism, he waits as a receiver for its dead citizens.

Viewed through the lens of the Annunciation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection, the ending of "The Dead" draws its interpretation from Christianity. Walzl says that Gabriel lives up to his reputation of "rebirth and renewal" (31). Examining Gretta's role helps us make this hopeful conclusion because it is she, through her symbolic bearing of Michael Furey, through telling Gabriel his story, who offers a gift of life to the world. She presents

Gabriel with the chance for epiphany. Michael's story then offers Gabriel a chance to change and be reborn. While having his epiphany, Gabriel projects this chance at new life to all of Ireland through snow symbolism, giving each of its citizens the opportunity to change and be resurrected in their own sense. The Annunciation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection work together to show Joyce offering a chance of hope and new life for Ireland.

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