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# "Conscious of, but could not apprehend"

Joyce's own epiphany through  
"The Dead"

*Leah Kelson Parks*

The night of August 13, 1903, James Joyce's mother died an early death at the age of forty-four. Mary (May) Jane Murray Joyce was diagnosed with cirrhosis of the liver (although it was likely cancer of the liver) only four months prior to her passing. Irish modernist author James Joyce returned from Paris in April 1903 to see his mother, which helped her improve slightly ("On This Day . . . 13 August."). James Joyce experienced tension with his mother occasionally due to differences in opinion: May Joyce was a devout Roman catholic while James Joyce fought against the church and organized religion as a whole. Richard Ellmann explained that "to quarrel with the Church, as at first, . . . led him to quarrel with his mother and by extension with his motherland" (Ellmann). This difference in religious beliefs resurfaced when May Joyce fell into a coma on the 13th of August. Her brother John Murray, among others present, knelt to pray by her bedside. However, James Joyce did not kneel. When John Murray urged him to do so, he refused ("On This Day . . . 13 August."). Joyce's mother died later that night. He later felt remorse for his mother's death, saying that one of the reasons she had died was due to his "cynical frankness of conduct" (qtd. in Paige).

In the time between his mother's death and the publication of his short story, Joyce contracted rheumatic fever; he spent some time in the hospital, and his recovery took several months. While he was sick, Joyce wrote "The Dead" (Gabler xii) which was published in 1914. In a time when death's door was closer than ever, Joyce experienced self-reflection and self-refinement. True to Joycean shortstory rhetoric, "The Dead" exhibits a paralyzed character, Gabriel, and his epiphany as defined by Joyce. Joycean scholar Florence Walzl interprets Joyce's "The Dead" as "a story of maturation, tracing the spiritual development of a man from insularity and egotism to humanitarianism and love" (Walzl 46). While I agree with Walzl's description of Gabriel's epiphany of love, I'd like to take her argument a step further. I argue that the "spiritual development" is instead a spiritual paradigm shift for Joyce, rather than for Gabriel. Joyce, using Gabriel as a foil, ultimately has his own epiphany through the symbolic and biographical characters in "The Dead". I am not claiming Joyce's sudden conversion to religion, because that would be both illogical and incongruent with his further writings. But I am, however, outlining his recognition—or epiphany—of the deep significance that religion has in the lives of those he loves. This newfound empathy does not cause him to be religious or even to be a defender of the believers but rather to be conscious and respectful of the beliefs of others.

To understand the significance of Joyce's own epiphany, we must understand Joyce's unique definition of "epiphany" itself. While Joyce never specifically defined the concept of epiphany in his usage of the word, it is useful to look at the way Stephan Daedalus uses it in Joyce's "Stephan hero". Stephen explains that epiphanies are a sudden and momentary showing forth or disclosure of one's authentic inner self. This disclosure might manifest itself in vulgarities of speech, gestures, or memorable phases of the mind. Additionally, Joyce's brother Stanislaus described epiphanies as a Freudian slip ("Epiphanies"). Regardless of the hypothetical meanings posed by Joycean scholars, Joyce intended for the meaning to be unclear as a way for each person to internalize the personal application. For the sake of this paper, I will use the definition as posed by Stephen Daedalus of a disclosure of one's authentic inner self.

In order to experience his own epiphany, Joyce needed a foil; Gabriel in "The Dead" acts as a foil for Joyce so that he may find a solution to the discontent he is experiencing. Once viewed this way, the commonalities between "The Dead" and Joyce's own life are obvious. While both Gabriel

and Joyce were writers, it is not coincidental that Joyce chose to give Gabriel a writing position that he, too, possessed. At the beginning of the story, Gabriel's pretentious attitude is evidenced by his vacillation between including a Robert Browning quote because he fears that it "would be above the heads of his hearers" (Joyce 155). However, during the party, Gabriel speaks with Miss Ivors who enjoyed his review of a Robert Browning poem. Her knowledge of the poet only proves that Gabriel has underestimated his audience and overestimated his own knowledge. By the end of the story he realizes the frivolity of his writings by calling his speech "foolish" (193). As a writer, Joyce is making commentary through Gabriel the writer: writing is often foolish and the audience knows more than the author gives them credit for. For Gabriel, his writing looked foolish in comparison to what his wife Gretta had experienced with Michael Furey. With Gabriel as the foil, Joyce discovers that writing may not be as important as his relationship with those he loves, and specifically with his mother. In essence, Joyce is recognizing that his priorities may have been more lopsided than he had thought and that his mother's priorities (religion and family as exhibited by her last hours of life) may have been more balanced and appropriate than his own.

Joyce's realization—or epiphany—about priorities comes while Gabriel is with Gretta. The obvious association is if Gabriel is Joyce, then Gretta is Nora, Joyce's wife. First, both Gretta and Nora have two children: one girl and one boy. Gretta describes the children, Tom and Lottie, to the Misses Morken upon arriving at the party (Joyce 157). Similarly, Nora gave birth to children Lucia (Williams) and Giorgio (Jordan). Second, both Gretta and Nora are from Galway. Miss Ivors inquires of Gabriel (referring to Gretta), "She's from Connacht, isn't she?" (Joyce 164). From Margo Norris's footnote, we understand that Connacht is the northwestern province of Ireland and location of the city Galway, Nora's birthplace (Joyce 164, footnote 8). Third, the song that reminds Gretta of Michael, *The Lass of Aughrim*, links Gretta and Nora. Gretta knows the song from home (Joyce 190) and Margo Norris teaches us that Nora likely taught the song to Joyce (Joyce 183, footnote 8). Finally, Gretta and Nora both had lovers by the name of Michael. Gretta explains to Gabriel who used to sing her the song: "It was a young boy I used to know . . . named Michael Furey" (Joyce 190). Gretta then explains that she and Michael were courting when Michael got sick. She explains that Michael died when coming to her in the rain. Similarly, Nora pursued a courtship with a man named Michael Bodkin. According to scholar Sarah Marsh:

The courtship of Nora Barnacle and Michael Bodkin ended in 1903 when Bodkin was restricted to bed rest in Galway for his steadily worsening case of tuberculosis. . . . Michael Bodkin's death from tuberculosis was hastened by the last visit he paid to Nora: ignoring his doctor's orders, he went out in pouring rain to sing farewell to her beneath an apple tree, fatally aggravating his illness. (Marsh 107)

The commonalities are, yet again, strikingly similar with Joyce's life and those of his loved ones.

The epiphany, for both Joyce and Gabriel, hinges entirely on the character of Michael Furey. The realization comes when both men see the importance of Michael (or his symbol) in the lives of their wives. Gabriel recognizes that his lust and sexuality will never be equivalent to the passion and love of Michael Furey. Gabriel discovers (in reference to Michael Furey's feelings): "he had never felt like that himself towards any woman but he know that such a feeling must be love" (Joyce 194). Gabriel expresses that he "was fading" (194) as if to show that he has possibly run out of time to better himself for Gretta.

However, Michael Furey's greatest significance for Joyce's epiphany is a symbolic rather than a biographical parallel. Michael Furey is representative of the Christ figure and ultimately symbolic for religion as a whole. First, Michael dies for someone else just like the sacrificial Christ does. Gretta says about Michael, "I think he died for me" (Joyce 191). Similarly, common Christianity teaches that Christ died for the believers. Second, Gretta is stirred to remembrance of Michael through song. The song *The Lass of Aughrim* is the trigger for Gretta's memories of Michael. Likewise, in Christian culture, church-goers sing songs (hymns) to remember divinity. For example, a Christian hymn by William W. Phelps entitled "O God, the Eternal Father" expresses: "That sacred, holy off'ring, by man least understood, to have our sins remitted and take his flesh and blood . . ." (Deseret Sunday School Union 175). Finally, Michael is laid to rest on a hill: "[snow] was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried" (Joyce 194). Similarly, Christ was crucified on the hill Golgotha (Calvary). Joyce makes a parallel between Gretta's love and devotion for Michael Furey and Nora's love and devotion for Christ, or rather, religion.

Upon arriving at the hotel, Gabriel has already been fantasizing about his wife. He is drawn to her sexually and that is the only topic he wishes to discuss. He asks Gretta, "Gretta dear, what are you thinking about?" (Joyce

189), trying to provoke the sexual conversation. But Gretta only wishes to discuss Michael Furey. Gabriel has the epiphany that he is not the only man in Gretta's life and that the dead are as real as ever, simply because of memories that exist: "His soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead. He was conscious of, but could not apprehend, their wayward and flickering existence" (Joyce 194). With the symbols of Gabriel as Joyce, Gretta as Nora, and Michael Furey as a religious representative, this conversation looks quite different. In this context, Joyce is trying to talk about the things of the world (carnal, sexual desires) while Nora is trying to speak of religion (Michael).

This conversation is similar to a reality that Joyce experienced following his mother's death. On August 29, only sixteen days after the death of his mother, Joyce decided to have a frank talk with Nora. The two were still unwed and Nora had been considering entering into a school of religious training or running away with Joyce. Joyce found it necessary to explain who he really was before Nora made any decisions in regard to him (Maddox). Joyce wrote to Nora after the conversation that night: "I may have pained you tonight by what I said but surely it is well that you should know my mind on most things? My mind rejects the whole present social order and Christianity—home, the recognised virtues, classes of life, and religious doctrines" (Maddox). Joyce, after experiencing the discontent and pain following his mother's death concerning his religious beliefs, did not want to put Nora—nor himself—through that pain again and thus thought it necessary to warn Nora. Ultimately, Nora chose Joyce but did not shift her perspective to align with Joyce's immediately. The conversation that Gretta and Gabriel have in "The Dead," reflects the conversation that Joyce and Nora had that day. Joyce, after a time, realized that religion (spirits, Christ, as it were) plays a large part in the lives of those he loved of which he became "conscious of, but could not apprehend" (Joyce 194).

The story ends as Gabriel hears several taps on the window pane which cause him to look out to see "snow was general all over Ireland" and remarks that it falls "upon all the living and the dead" (Joyce 194). The snow, white and pure, becomes a symbol for the religious beliefs. As Joyce looks through his own type of pain (pane) because of his mother's death, he realizes that snow, the religious type, covers all of Ireland. And not only that, it covers the living and the dead: his mother, Nora, and himself. While Joyce isn't able to understand ("[can] not apprehend") why the Irish remained devout

Catholics, he does become aware (“conscious”) of it. More specifically, he becomes aware of his mother’s piety.

The writing of *Dubliners*, as a whole, was what ultimately led Joyce to experience his own epiphany. When Joyce began writing *Dubliners*, he saw Ireland as “that scullery maid of Christendom” (Conn). Full of criticism and pain, Joyce attempted to straighten the “cursed . . . system” (Quigley 132) that he accused for his mother’s death while burying his own remorse for his “cynical frankness of conduct” (Joyce qtd. in Paige) which he also felt had led to her death. While Joyce did not set aside his religious radicalism or even come to understand (apprehend) the beliefs of others, he was, however, able to come to terms with (conscious of) his mother’s beliefs and the important role that they played in her life. Looking through the biographical lens of Joyce’s mother’s death, “The Dead” becomes a story of reconciliation for Joyce himself. The title “The Dead” does not simply describe Michael Furey and the importance of remembrance of the dead; “The Dead” literally describes Joyce’s own epiphany. Yet, I believe that “The Dead” ultimately came to describe the feelings that Joyce had once festered in conjunction with his remorse: his hard feelings toward Ireland ultimately died because not only did Joyce forgive Ireland for his mother’s death, but he also forgave himself.

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