



SNOW SYMBOLISES THE PARADOX OF LIFE IN JAMES JOYCE'S "THE DEAD"

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ABSTRACT

Snow is one of the most important symbols in the short story "The Dead" written by James Joyce. Descriptions of snow are replete in the story, beginning with Gabriel scraping snow from his shoes and ending with him watching the snow fall outside the window. In the tie between these two descriptions, however, Gabriel becomes attuned to the symbolism of the snow. At the beginning, the snow is a force of nature. It is impedance, something which threatens to make walking along the streets of Dublin an annoyance and a difficult task. Gabriel thinks about snow only in terms of how it affects him on a practical level, so he must scrape the wet snow from his shoes so as to keep them in a good condition. Snow is symbolic in his life since it shows that he focuses only on himself and lacks empathy for others.

KEYWORDS : Attuned, impedance, annoyance, scrape, incidental etc.

The Dead is a short story written by James Joyce in 1907, and published in 1914 in Dubliners collection. The final story within this collection is entitled *The Dead*. According to Walzl, "The Dead" was written in 1907, three years after the other stories in his collection were written. It is also one of the longest pieces within *Dubliners*, which suggests its importance and complexity. Some scholars state that *The Dead* should be considered a novella because of its length and tendency to blend the real with the metaphorical. Through various images, Joyce illustrates aspects of norms and ritualistic behaviour, which functions as its own narrative at the expense of a classical story arc.

In general, *The Dead* is without a plot. The characters attend a dinner party. The extensive dialogue and repetitiveness make this story almost painful to read. However, Joyce keeps his readers entertained with comic relief and anticipation of a climactic end. In theory, Joyce's story illustrates the ritualism of daily life and how norms become social constructs.

During the late 1800s, Ireland merged with the United Kingdom of Great Britain with Scotland. Many Irish people immigrated to places like Dublin to free themselves of the social inequalities in their homeland. Joyce's "The Dead" shows the lifestyles of the Irish middle class in Dublin in the late 1800s. As suggested by Whelan, this story is deeply influenced by Irish history: "One of the chief discoveries of this excavation is the buried history of the Famine embedded at its centre. The resonance of "The Dead" and its peculiarly charged language derives from this depth of historical layering, all the more evocative because it is hidden" (Whelan 59). Joyce's work is a masterpiece that thrives on metaphors. Through repetition and other themes, Joyce makes his readers feel like they are a part of the Irish identity during the late 1800s.

The entire story, "The Dead," is embedded with allusions of ritual. Like Samuel Beckett who once said that "form is content; content is form," (Jaurretche), Joyce shows repetition and ritual in his narrative. The horse's story seems to have been told numerous times within this group. Joyce constantly refers to his characters by their first and last name, as if the reader did not remember his description of them. Molly Ivors is referred to as Molly, Molly Ivors and Ms. Ivors. By doing this, Joyce shows his repetition through language. Even the setting, the dinner party, is a repetition. The guests meet at the same time each week and at the same place although many of them do not seem to enjoy it. By showing us a setting with numerous norms and rituals, Joyce is depicting the ways in which we participate with those norms. Many of the characters do not have children or mates, which causes the reader to notice something different about Gabriel. He is nervous during the party, which is not a trait found in the other characters. By showing us the alternatives to ritual, Joyce shows his reader what happens when people violate the accepted norms.

Michael Furey is a martyr who died for Gretta's sake. When Gretta hears the song, *The Lass of Aughrim*, she begins to cry, thinking of how Michael used to sing. Because he has the ability to affect others even after his death, he is more alive than the other characters who still have life. The monks attempt to imitate death through their lives of ritual by sleeping in coffins. The monks want to exit their carnal existence by refusing to talk. Not only have they freed themselves from speech and society, but they have achieved this through self-negation—or living like they are dead. Some of the characters at the dinner party do not understand their behaviour: "Freddy Malins explained to him, as best he could, that the monks were trying to make up for the sins committed by all the sinners in the outside world" (Joyce 16). Unlike the monks, the other characters do not see the purpose to their norms, but spend their time discussing other's rituals.

The characters attending the dinner party participate in numerous rituals, which allow them to solidify themselves as part of the group. As the story turns into a narrative of death, specifically Michael Furey's death, the characters illustrate that they are living a life that is moving toward death—from a metaphorically dead world toward their physical death. The story ends with a description of Michael Furey's gravesite. Because the rest of the story is without mention of Furey, this image seems like a strange choice for Joyce to end his book. By ending his work with the image of the lonely churchyard and Furey's grave, he is illustrating the importance of living beyond one's death (Walzl). The only way to achieve significant life after death is to have an impact on people.

Joyce's story, "The Dead," concludes his collection entitled *Dubliners*. The fact that it is the longest story in the novel and that it deals with supernatural themes and images caused many scholars to believe that it could be considered a novella. Through various images and the story's overall form, Joyce illustrates that repetition is embedded in our society, but without purpose, these norms will create a lifestyle for its obedient followers that is much like a mechanical part. Joyce ends his story, or novella, with the image of Furey's grave, a symbol that highlights the significance of Furey's life and ability to live-on beyond his death.

Snow is a distinctly external occurrence in the story. As Gabriel enters the house, there is "a light fringe of snow" on his coat and galoshes. Gabriel removes it from his shoes, shaking off the final traces of the outside world before he steps into the party. From there, he only glimpses the snow through windows. The snow falls outside, creating a contrast between the warm, bustling party in the bungalow and the cold chill weather outside.

When Gabriel first arrives at the party, it begins to snow on his clothing in a gradually oppressive manner "a light fringe of snow lay like a cap on the shoulder of his overcoat". (Joyce 2) Similarly his role in life and identity as an Irish man is a restrictive, cold and oppressing routine to him. In fact, his personality is restrictive and controlling to others. He even feels trapped by his own cautious and inhibited personality. He is an authority figure to Freddie and his education thrusts him as the powerful figure within the family. His family expects him to take the lead in the household and as the favourite niece he holds a high status. "It's such a relief," said Aunt Kate to Mrs. Conroy, "that Gabriel is here. I always feel easier in my mind when he's

here.” (Joyce 21) His restricts his inner desires. Therefore he feels uncomfortable in the world and unsure of how to react or behave.

His wife is a free spirit, remembers adventure, and demands more from life. This conflict is clearly seen as we witness his difficulty in communicating with women, who symbolize the Irish movement. He struggles with the idea of freedom. The independent nature of the maid and the rebuke from Molly Ivors for his lack of patriotism leaves him confused and uncomfortable. He is a microcosm for many in Ireland and a representative of many today that live life insecure and defensive. Gretta wants to conquer the difficulties in life, even the routine. “She’d walk home in the snow if she were let.” (Joyce 23)says Gabriel. Walking in the snow displays victory, a lack of fear of the snow or rules and perhaps even an appreciation of the snow despite the grave dangers. Gabriel wants to provide, for Gretta and protect her from the snow with superficial warmth. But Gretta wants to face the snow head on or enjoy the fire. She is neither frail nor weak.

The hardships that Gretta endures mirrors the same restrictions that those from The Continent endure. “The snow would be lying on the branches of the trees and forming a bright cap on the top of the Wellington Monument.” (Joyce 24)The snow provides definition and attracts more attention to the Irish symbol, which evokes national pride. It is majestic as the snow cloaks around the monument, however the monument is not a living object. It is invincible to the oppression even if the people are not. The monument’s figure gives strength to the Irish.Its presence lives on and the people remain in the past. Now, the Irish movement is in a deadened paralyzed state. “The Wellington Monument wore a gleaming cap of snow that flashed westward over the white field of Fifteen Acres.” (Joyce 4)

The snow appears before Gabriel speaks, foreshadowing the contents of Gabriel’s speech, his feeling about the speech and his influence on others. The woman, Aunt Julia enjoys snow’s appearance while Aunt Kate sees snow as a celebration. However, Mr. D’Arcy doesn’t share the same appreciation for the snow. The men feel inadequate to the forced repression. It has been the heaviest snow fall in thirty years. As the snow turns just to streaks and patches we see Gabriel’s hard heart softening, wanting to forget about the cares of the world. He longs to recall those past affectionate moments, to make his wife forget the years of their dull existence together and remember only their moments of ecstasy.

The years, he felt, had not quenched his soul or hers. “Their children, his writing, her household cares had not quenched all their souls’ tender fire.” (Joyce 23)In one letter that he had written to her: “Why is it that words like these seem to me so dull and cold? Is it because there is no word tender enough to be your name?” (Joyce 23) The statue also is covered in snow but only in patches. But now, after “kindling again of so many memories, the first touch of her body, musical and strange and perfumed, sent through him a keen pang of lust. Under the cover of her silence he pressed her arm closely to his side; and, as they stood at the hotel door, he felt that they had escaped from their lives and duties, escaped from home and friends and run away together with wild and radiant hearts to a new adventure.” (Joyce 24)

“He saw himself as a ludicrous figure, acting as a penny boy for his aunts, a nervous, well-meaning sentimentalist, orating to vulgarisms and idealizing his own clownish lusts, the pitiable fatuous fellow he had caught a glimpse of in the mirror.” (Joyce 12) When Gretta speaks of Michael, there is no mention of snow, but instead he is like a fire. Not afraid of danger, Michael Furey the uninhibited figure, suffers a physical death. Yet his powerful memories, enduring love and strong emotions last forever. Gabriel contemplates his wife’s words which enables him to reach an epiphany. The snow falls again, but this time, it takes on a different meaning. Passion from the past can continue into the future.

The snow essentially symbolizes mortality. It is white, it is cold; winter is the season of death. Gabriel is shocked and dismayed to hear the story of Michael Furey, the boy who died for his wife Gretta when she was young. At the end of the story, Gabriel watches the snow fall outside, highly conscious of death and feeling bitter toward the emptiness of his own life, which he sees as a living death.

“Better pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dimly with age.” (Joyce 26) Gabriel reflects that it is better to die in a youthful fit of passion than to live a long, dull,

empty life. Passion usually connotes “heat” and “fire,” which contrasts with the snow falling over the winter landscape, where things “fade and wither.” Writers commonly use the seasons to parallel the stages of a man’s life: spring represents childhood and adolescence, summer early adulthood, autumn maturity, and winter old age and death.

Throughout the text, all manifestations of winter—cold, the color white, snow, and the season itself—usually represent mortality. The fact that snow falls indiscriminately on both the living and the dead all over Dublin highlights the fact that many Dubliners are living meaningless lives and are essentially dead while alive. As Gabriel enters the house there is a light fringe of snow on his coat and galoshes. This use of snow and cold in relation to Gabriel’s body accentuates his relationship with death. As we later learn, Gabriel feels that it would be better to die young for passion, as Michael Furey, than to live a long empty life, as he is doing.

This indiscriminate quality of snow, which is said to be falling all over Ireland, highlights the fact that mortality is universal, and also serves to unite the living and the dead. Some of the living, like Gabriel, have not really lived, and some of the dead, like Michael Furey, hold significance equal to that of the living, as in *Gretta*’s mind. So the living and the dead are not really that different, and the snow is a reminder that everyone will end with the same fate.

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