

The dead by james joyce essays examples

[Life](#), [Death](#)



The plot of the story is as follows. The opening exposition is deceiving, because it makes it seem as if the story will be a cheerful one about a party. The party is set for Miss Morkan's annual dance. The setting of the story begins with everyday gossip, frivolity, and the anxiety of waiting for Gabriel Conroy and his wife to arrive. As the narrator says, "they had every reason to be fussy on such a night." Lily, the caretaker's daughter, is afraid Freddy Malins will turn up at the dance drunk. Gabriel is a young man, slightly unsure of himself, wearing galoshes in the snow. Gabriel's uncertainty is, in fact, the real reason this story is being told.

It's Christmas time in a small town, perhaps a few days after Christmas. Snow covers lightly the streets. Snow is cold, "snow stiffened frieze," and we learn that it is not only the Winter weather that is making everything cold. The coldness is both a physical description of the setting, but also an indicator of deep psychological isolation. Gabriel thinks of what he will say in a speech he will give, and is rebuffed that Lily won't accept his Christmas gift. Gabriel and his wife talk to their aunt, and his wife says Gabriel insisted she wear galoshes, footwear fit for the snow. They both intend to stay the night in the town's hotel. Gabriel is a teacher and also writes a literary column, a position in which apparently he is not always confident to share with his relatives. Every mundane conversation Gabriel has at the party turns into a self-conscious moment for him. He says he is going to bike with friends in Europe, and he feels ashamed that he is not visiting his own country, and when his wife asks him to take her to Galway for vacation, he responds coldly.

Gabriel carves the Christmas goose and gives his speech, which is rather

long and full of allusions to Greek mythology and English Literature.

Afterwards, he makes bad jokes, and he had unwittingly hurt the feelings of Miss Ivors, and at the end of the party everyone leaves in a sort of hurried way. He notices a woman on the stairwell, and realizes after a moment it is his wife. He had not recognized her at first. She was lost in thought listening to a song being played, “ The Lass of Aughrim.”

Later, at the hotel, Gabriel is flirtatious, but he notices that his wife is still to herself. After pressing her, she tells him that the song that was playing at the dance reminded her of a boy in Galway who used to sing her that song; his name was Michael Furey; and “ Michael Furey had braved death.”. He died young, and she remembers him that night, and her telling the story to Gabriel evokes shame and embarrassment, and frustration. His wife tells him that she was the reason Michael died. Before she was set to move away from Galway, he had walked through the snow to meet her, had braved the cold winter, but when she told him to go home, he did, but a week later, he died. Hearing this story, Gabriel sees his wife differently, and after she goes to bed, the story ends with an image of Gabriel going through his life and wondering about the past, and the question of his own identity, and love.

The characters in the story are allowed to change and we get to know them better than the other stories written by Joyce. Since the story is over fifteen thousand words, and the bulk of it takes place at a dinner party, the characters have time to talk, to express themselves. For example, Gabriel is given lots of expositions in the story, and we see him interact with everyone at the party, including his wife, the town drunk, Miss Ivors, and everyone else. Miss Ivors is at first “ warm” and confident, but by the end she had

buttoned up her coat “ and would not stay.” The town drunk, is at first drinking lemonade, but by the end is “ an abundance of laughter,” making everyone laugh, to the disappointment of Mr. Brown.

But the story also allows the character of Gabriel’s wife to develop. It is odd that Gabriel sees her in this thought: “ He had felt proud and happy then, happy that she was his, proud of her grace and wifely carriage,” but she is more than just a wife, which is part of Gabriel’s inability to her transformation. On a first reading, we miss clues to Gabriel’s uncertainty, and his characterization as a rather pitiful fellow. For example, even in the most simple exchanges he feels doubtful about who he is. After speaking to Lily, he “ felt he had made a mistake and, without looking at her, kicked off his galoshes ” Typically in a short story, it is one character who gets the focus, and while it is evident in this story, that the focus is Gabriel, the story is also focused on his wife. She appears at first to be the typical wife, but at the end of the story Joyce changes her importance from a wife to a beautiful woman with “ terra-cotta and salmon pink” furls to her dress. The story abruptly changes, because Gabriel only sees “ a woman standing near the top flight,” and astonishes himself that who he is seeing is his wife. The latter three quarters of the story takes place in the hotel, and a large piece of the narrative is his wife’s retelling of how she knew Michael Furey, his untimely, death, and Gabriel’s reaction to her story.

The story “ The Dead” is connected to the other stories read in class. For example, in “ Araby,” we can imagine that Gabriel is like a little boy who goes to the country fair. In this story too, the events begin with an image of joy, a fair, similar to the mirth that is depicted by Gabriel’s Christmas dance

gathering. But just as in *Araby*, both stories end with anguish and sadness. The boy in *Araby* feels anguish, because the trip to the bazaar did not turn out as he liked, so his “ eyes burned with anguish and anger.” Gabriel’s “ soul swooned” and he feels like he sees both life and death, in a kind of apocalyptic vision. Also in “ *The Sisters*,” we can imagine Gabriel is the boy who experiences the death of a friend who is a priest as a lost, I found it strange that neither I nor the day seemed in the mourning mood and I felt even annoyed at discovering in myself a sensation of freedom as if I had been freed from something by his death.” Gabriel’s character is the last story in the series, because he is to be found in traces throughout the other stories. In the “ *Boarding House*,” a different kind of social class mixes together, but we can see Gabriel in Jack, or how Little Chandler in “ *A Little Cloud*” has a similar love of literature as does Gabriel. Although in *Two Gallants*,” Gabriel is less like the story of the two drinking men, we are led to make comparisons between the men of the story, and the characterization of Freddy Malins in “ *The Dead*.”

The most important theme in the story is of personal change and self-awareness, but also how a person can see someone for who they are, but at the same be unable to see. For example, Gabriel sees his wife as a symbol of “ grace and mystery,” but he is unable to interpret her own change and transformation. Typical of a short story, the story shows us how characters change, and how especially through the perspective of Gabriel, one man can go through several transformations, but Gabriel himself, for all of his erudition is unaware of his own behavior, and cannot see beyond the idealizations he creates. For example, he offends Miss Ivor's in his

overwrought speech about Ireland, and conflates his wife's wish to journey to Galway because she is secretly in love with someone else. In remembering love of his wife, Gabriel remembers a letter he had written, “ Why is it that words like these seem dull and cold? Is it because there is no word tender enough to be your name?” The story shows us how at odd moments in our life, memories of the past can creep up on us, and we long for what we have lost. Such as when Gabriel longs for “ Moments of their secret life together burst like stars upon his memory.”

The story is particularly Irish. The story, even though it is longer, has characteristics all of Joyce's stories have. The story is Irish, of course, and there is a hidden criticism, both of the Church, and the State. Gabriel asks why do the monks in the monastery not sleep in nice beds, and not in the coffins they are supposed to sleep to remind them of death. “ That's the rule of the order” is the answer, and it also underpins Gabriel's speech about Ireland, when he tries to compliment his country, but ends up criticizing Irish Nationalism: “ it is rather a failing than anything to be boasted of.”

One salient feature of all Joyce's works is his use of language. In this story, Joyce tries to capture the mood of talk and conversation that would pervade a dinner party during Christmastime. The first sentence of the story is written playfully: “ Lily, the caretaker's daughter, was literally run off her feet.” With an opening sentence like this one, it leads the reader to think the story could be about anything, let alone man's inability to communicate, no matter how we try to listen to each other. Lily is “ literally run off her feet” because she is very much alive, compared to the character of Gabriel who cannot even know his own wife and must pine, “ listening to her deep-drawn

breath,” and his rumination on “ listening to a thought-tormented music.”

The irony of Joyce’s use of language is that it is so playful, so original, yet its central theme is our ability to not be lifted off our feet, which is a metaphor for our inability to understand, let alone listen to one another.

The story participates in the tradition of Modernism. The structure of the story is about how one event, seemingly mundane, breaks out in the end into something radically different. The last sentence of the story, “ upon all the living and the dead,” is an apt theme for Joyce’s literature, and modernism. First, we are deep set into the subjectivity of the characters. It is a trait of Joyce’s works and Modernism in literature. In other words, Joyce tries to get into the subjectivity of conscious thoughts, the lines of thinking that invade our waking and sleeping hours. We cannot get out of our heads, and Joyce puts thoughts onto paper, and it reminds us of our own lives.

When Gabriel “ asks himself” or thinks about the color of his wife’s dress, or when he remembers something in a conversation, it alludes to the everydayness of life, and points to the richness of our inner experience.

Joyce is trying, in this story, to show that a person’s life is a culmination of success and loss. On the loss side of things, we are confronted with the truth Joyce tries to show, when he has Gabriel think to himself, “ For the years, he felt, had not quenched his soul, or hers.” Gabriel tries so hard to be successful at life, but he is always coming face to face with loss. The story is about how no matter how much we try to sum up the events of our life into a complete picture, it is inevitable that we realize that we never understood our life at all. It is in the end, that Gabriel, so sure he understands his wife, realizes he does not know her at all, and this makes him sad, but also

doubtful about the meaning of his life. Gabriel wanted to take his wife back to the room and make love to her — he had felt “ a keen pang of lust” — but instead she tells him a sad story that crushes his fantasy, the meaning he had created to escape from their “ lives and duties, escaped from home and friends and run away together with wild and radiant hearts to a new adventure.” In story form, then, the narrative is about how we find meaning in life, and how this task is next to impossible.