

Symbolism of snow in Joyce's *The Dead*



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James Joyce is lauded for his distinct style of writing in free direct discourse. Though his style may seem chaotic and disjointed, Joyce adds a single fixture to his narratives that conveys a unity and connects the otherwise haphazard dialogue. In *The Dead*, the final story of Joyce's masterpiece, *Dubliners*, the symbol of snow unites the characters and is cause for a drastic transformation in the dynamic character, Gabriel. Snow is the catalyst that unifies mankind through the flawed essence of human nature, and expands Gabriel's narrow mind as he escapes from a superficial mindset and enters a world of imperfect humanity. Snowflakes are random, unique and fragile, and thus symbolic of human nature. Humanity overflows with faults and quirks, which constitute life. The versatility and volatility of snow mirrors the human disposition. For example, melting snow becomes weak and transparent water, exemplifying the pathetic, but common characteristics of humanity. Frozen snow becomes hard, strong, and unshakable ice; this represents the domineering characteristics of humanity. Joyce uses snow to illustrate both the weak and the strong traits of water and ice, thus snow represents the fissures and cracks, as well as the strength and beauty, that embody life. Just as falling snow covers all of nature, Joyce's snow unifies humanity with the imperfect uniqueness of human nature. The snow affects every guest arriving at Julia and Kate's party, Freddie the watery drunk, D'Arcy the icy tenor and the many characters in between. Humanity is connected through the flawed traits of the human situation, personified in the ubiquitous blanket of snow. Gabriel is a man obsessed with a superficial perfection, which in the beginning of the party causes him to fear the harsh reality of human nature. The moment that Gabriel enters his elderly aunt's party, his actions speak alone for his mightier-than-thou attitude. Upon his arrival, Gabriel's curt

remark towards his wife for causing their late arrival, perfectly sets his tone as he initially tries to escape from the snow. Gabriel, “ stood on the mat scraping the snow from his galoshes...He continued scraping his feet vigorously... A light fringe of snow lay like a cape on the shoulders of his overcoat and like toecaps on the toes of his galoshes” (2497). His pointed comment towards his spouse uncovers his self-conceived dominance in the relationship, and the force he uses to rid himself of any snow shows how hard Gabriel works to appear sophisticated and free of the troubles of humanity. This is the first instance that Gabriel comes into contact with the symbolic snow, and the most pertinent, for his hurry to shed the snow that unifies the party guests, directly detaches him from the rest of the group and from the flaw that befalls them all. Later again galoshes are the subject of conversation when Gretta, Gabriel's wife, makes mention of her husband's demand that she wear galoshes in the snow. She jokes, “ Tonight even he wanted me to put them on, but I wouldn't. The next thing you know he'll be buying me a diving suit” (2499). Not only does this exemplify the extremes he will go through to protect his wife and himself from the snow, but the mention of the diving suit relates to the snow in the form of water; Gabriel is petrified of snow in any form. Again, this discourse shows the distinct differences between him and his wife, which is furthered when Gabriel jokes that Gretta would walk home in the snow if he would let her. Gretta immerses herself in true humility, in this case the snow. This serves as ironic juxtaposition to the superficial and arrogant world of her husband. The entrance of the couple immediately sets Gabriel apart from the guests, due to his reaction towards the unifying snow. Adding to his arrogant entrance, Gabriel's superior feeling is further unfurled when he nervously rehearses <https://assignbuster.com/symbolism-of-snow-in-joyces-the-dead/>

the speech he will give at dinner, deciding that the subject matter is “above the heads” (2498) of the guests. He toys with speaking of something on their level and less intellectual by his standards. Again he feels no unity with, in his estimation, the lower class guests who possess an abundance of faults. Like Gabriel's reaction towards the snow upon his arrival, his attitude towards the guests reveals he does not wish to share a unity with his fellow man, and he disguises any signs of a weak nature. Furthering his detachment is a surprising confrontation with his dance partner, Miss Ivors, which separates Gabriel even more from the snowy blanket of commonness and imperfections that envelopes the other guests. Twice Miss Ivors confronts Gabriel: about writing for a paper that represents the opposition; as well as asking him to vacation near his wife's hometown in Northern Ireland. His angry reply to both instances is curt, especially to the vacation offer, “O, to tell you the truth, retorted Gabriel suddenly, I'm sick of my own country, sick of it!” (2504). This outburst, incited by Miss Ivors' offer, breaks any remaining unity that Gabriel has with the party guests. During the dialogue, Miss Ivors is described in the following manner, “Miss Ivors promptly took his hand in a warm grasp”(2498) and “Miss Ivors said warmly”(2499). What little human nature and unity with fellow men Gabriel had left, Miss Ivors' warmth melted away, like it was snow. Miss Ivors' ability to melt the unifying snow is made clear through her political obsession. This breaks her unity with the group and sets her up to further Gabriel's fleeting ties to his peers. Miss Ivors' character and Gabriel's reactions towards her serve as tools that are used to completely isolate Gabriel from the snow and what it represents. Midway through the party, Gabriel's superficial outlook begins to thaw. Gabriel, as a human being, lacks the warmth that comes

from the friction of ordinary humanity. He is a cold person who is perhaps afraid that being covered by snow will indeed freeze him. Yet a transformation begins when he finds himself reflecting upon life as he stares out the window and the pure omnipresent snow draws his attention, as is seen when, “ Gabriel’s warm trembling fingers tapped the cold pane of the window. How cool it must be outside! How pleasant it would be to walk alone, first along by the river and through the park... how much more pleasant it would be than here at the dinner table” (2505-2506). Gabriel is drawn to the snow and his yearning to leave the table and walk through it is the first sign that he wishes to cast aside his condescending demeanor and find the meaning in his life, buried under the ice. Gabriel feels no emotional connection with anyone from the party, and here he seems ready to drop his haughty facade; the flaws of humanity seem more appealing. When finally exposed to the snow again he is overcome with an awareness that is unmistakably human. For example, during their walk home from the party, Gabriel is overcome by the beauty in his wife and feels a love that he has not seen since their matrimony; it is a sentiment that is strange and new to him. Though physically brisk, walking in the snow melts the protective layers Gabriel has built up. Gabriel discovers that he must open his inner self and let out the friction of his true struggles. It is only now that Gabriel is vulnerable to human emotion. At the hotel, Gretta reveals a secret that prevents her from reciprocating her husband’s newfound love. To some, this scandalous information may seem to have a reverting affect on Gabriel’s self-revelations, yet despite the news, his brand new consciousness permits him to feel more alive than he ever was when he was hidden amongst superficiality. Gretta’s saddening story allows him to feel real human pain,

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and for the first time he puts up no guard against the agony of humanity and he feels sincere humility. The truth and reality behind Greta's confession only helps to immerse him in the snowfall of compassion. He falls asleep at peace with the snow that has fallen over his universe, fully uniting him with humanity: " 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"(2524). Gabriel undergoes an epiphany that the idiosyncrasies of human nature are unavoidable, and by immersing himself in the snow, he shares a unity that makes him feel alive. Joyce defines modest aspects of humanity through the vulnerable forms of snowfall, and unites mankind with the snow's omnipotence. It is the snow that Gabriel initially shuns, and it is the snow that finally opens Gabriel to the idea of humanness. Joyce's purposefully chaotic writing style truly mirrors the muddled emotions of Gabriel, before he is swallowed by the blizzard of humility and human imperfection.