

# [The erotic in joyce’s short stories](https://assignbuster.com/the-erotic-in-joyces-short-stories/)

It is Joyce’s use of voyeurism that most characterizes the erotic in “ The Dead,” “ The Boarding House,” “ Two Gallants,” and “ Araby.” Eroticism is strongly driven by mystery and suspense. By creating a passive individual experiencing sexuality without actual contact, Joyce can use every aspect of that individual’s own perception to paint the ideally charged moment. The voyeur simply watches and waits, desire increasing with avoided consummation. In all four stories, the details, tones, circumstances, imagery and language communicate eroticism by emphasizing this desire. Actual interaction, when it happens, is veiled from the reader, creating a whole separate world in what isn’t told. We see erotic action through imagination, memory or description. The lack of realization and interaction strengthens the erotic by keeping it veiled, creating in inner world we cannot know. The rhythm of Joyce’s cyclical motifs and the sensuality of his visual images create the perfect frame for this sense of recognition and desire without consummation. Joyce tends to occupy more than one consciousness in weaving his narrative (Fisher, in lecture, 10/4/99). Watching and waiting are characteristic of every point of view involved in these stories. In “ The Boarding House,” action is motivated entirely through observation. Mrs. Mooney “[notices] that something is going on between Polly and one of the young men,” (Signet Classic, 60) because she is closely watching. Her own emotion and decision to act are driven purely by what she sees between these two people. The reader becomes voyeur as well, switching peepholes almost systematically, and catching three different people in the state of waiting. In “ Two Gallants,” the use of watching is more apparent, as the encounter of two lovers is told entirely through the eyes of someone spying on them. Lenahan simply “ observe[s] them for a few minutes,” (53) and is affected by the sexuality of their exchange. Once the lovers have disappeared from sight, both the reader and Lenahan are forced to wait. Even when interaction never occurs, the excitement of waiting is achieved through passive eyes. In “ Araby,” and “ The Dead,” the protagonist is the principle voyeur in strikingly parallel images. Gabriel gazes up at his wife atop a flight of stairs (220) much like the young boy in “ Araby” perceives his object of desire, “…her figure defined by the light from the half-open door.” (24) These early erotic moments drive both stories forward, presenting untouched images to be pursued. Both become motifs, appearing again in both stories. Joyce’s use of imagery in setting each scene is full of sensory detail, reminding the reader that erotic observation communicates through every sense. In “ The Boarding House,” the scene is set in one such description:” It was a bright Sunday morning of early summer, promising heat, but with a fresh breeze blowing. All the windows of the boarding house were open and the lace curtains ballooned gently towards the street beneath the raised sashes. The belfry of George’s Church sent out constant peals…Breakfast was over in the boarding house and the table…was covered with plates on which lay yellow streaks of eggs with morsels of bacon-fat and bacon-rind.” (60)These sorts of images, tantalizing and palatable, occur throughout Dubliners. In these instances, the reader becomes voyeur, increasingly excited by the vision before them. Joyce further emphasizes the voyeurism of his erotic world with complimentary details. His physical descriptions of people are occupied with body parts and the clothes that cover them. This plays into the mystery and suspense of sexual tension, highlighting the importance of not seeing everything. Each part of the face and the hands are often referred to in every story, in scrutinizing detail. The closer the author lets us look, the more we will desire. A passage from “ Two Gallants” is rich with this veiled attention to the body:” Her blue serge skirt was held at the waist by a belt of black leather. The great silver buckle seemed to depress the centre of her body, catching the light stuff of her white blouse like a clip…Lenehan’s eyes noted approvingly her stout muscular body. Frank rude health glowed in her face, on her fat red cheeks and in her unabashed blue eyes.” (52)In this segment, and many like it, the use of “ her” rather than a proper name is a significant detail. Joyce uses nameless women to create even less attachment or reciprocity in these erotic encounters. In “ Two Gallants” and “ Araby,” the girls do not even seem to have names. In “ Araby,” the boy claims that “ her name was like a summons to all [his] foolish blood,” and that “ her name sprang to [his] lips in moments of strange prayers,”(25) without ever disclosing it. This heightens the feeling of mystery by reminding us of what we do not know, and preserving a sense of conscious distance. Even in “ The Dead,” throughout Gabriel’s excited observation, Gretta is mostly referred to “ she,” and “ his wife.” It is here that the use of pronouns stands out most as an intentional stylistic decision. Although Gabriel’s attraction to his wife should be anything but impersonal, Gretta’s erotic pull is stronger when she is something unfamiliar and distant, still waiting to be conquered. The imagery also contains symbolic objects and events. A harp appears in two separate stories. In “ Araby,” the reference is relatively explicit, as the young boy imagines “ my body was like a harp and her words and gestures were like fingers running upon the wires.” (25) The use of this image is more complex in “ Two Gallants,” when Lenahan and Corley pass a harpist in the street. In this sensual passage, the harpist is referred to as “ he,” and the instrument as “ she.” Joyce, using personification, describes an instrument “ heedless that her coverings had fallen about her knees,” thus exposed to all the voyeurs of the street. And by ending the moment with “[t]he notes of the air throbbed deep and full,”(50) Joyce draws attention to the rhythm of eroticism. This rhythm, seen also in the falling snow of “ The Dead,” gives hushed time to such sensual encounters. They become more real and believable when they have a heartbeat, and communicate sexuality on a more subconscious level. What Joyce does not tell us is equally important to everything we see, feel, smell, taste and hear in these erotic narratives. It is crucial that the encounters fail in the moments when the boundary between watching and having is crossed. This happens explicitly in “ Araby” and “ The Dead,” and is characterized specifically by a sudden awakening to reality. The watcher is suddenly no longer occupied by all the sensory pleasure of perceiving his subject. All the gleeful sexuality of “ Araby” ends with a moment of self-realization. (30) When the observer becomes aware of himself desiring his object, self-consciousness interrupts the eroticism. In “ The Dead,” Gabriel had fantasized about “ when they would be alone together,” getting no further than the instant when “ she would turn and look at him…”(225) This fantasy is realized later, continuing beyond the watching stage. When Gretta actually turns and approaches, no longer a simple object, her own separate experience becomes half of the moment. Gabriel’s erotic moment comes to an end as “ a shameful consciousness of his own person assail[s] him.” (231)This voyeuristic use of the erotic in Dubliners is tied to the nature of the entire book. Joyce is giving us a peephole into his own Dublin, commanding we lose self-consciousness and allow his vision to overtake us. He does not exclude romantic love by this method. On the contrary, this sort of watching creates the ideal situation for romance. In a space where self-consciousness must be abandoned, where fantasies proceed realities, the traditional roles of conquering male and submissive female fit perfectly. Joyce approaches human sexuality with tenderness, but a sense of modern actuality. Mostly, he reminds us that it is our own expectations that cloud the eroticism of the everyday world around us. We will find disappointment and failure by looking in the wrong places for sensual fulfillment, and limiting our sense of the erotic to our own passive perception.