"respectability and escape: unrealized potential in the dead”

In the Irish Catholic Society portrayed by James Joyce in Dubliners, the characters live in a world guided by “ respectability”, yet some are driven by the urge to escape. Joyce illustrates the reputable populace as false and undesirable, and depicts his protagonists as the few who recognize and attempt to seize opposing views. Nevertheless, in his somewhat pessimistic approach, Joyce concludes each tale with an inevitable resort to the world the characters had wished to escape. Most exemplary of this is “ The Dead”, the longest and most multifaceted of all the stories as it could arguably be a culmination of each previous narration. The lone story in the collection with a distinguished ending, “ The Dead” confirms that any attempt at escape will be ultimately thwarted at the expense of “ respectability,” as his final character, Gabriel Conroy, attempts to abscond, but to no avail. Joyce inserts subtle language of escape throughout the story. When Gabriel Conroy is first introduced, he takes off his goloshes to reveal patent leather shoes. (p. 202) This is notable for its reference to both the aspect of escape and the aspect of respectability. Gabriel’s patent leather shoes (shoes are a mode of escape) are covered from the snow by the goloshes. It is interesting to note that the mediums that could bring this man to escape, are “ covered” (“ respectability”). It is obvious that Gabriel attempts to stray from the typical mindset of the general public, as proven by his newspaper analyses (which earn him the uncoveted title “ West Briton” by Miss Ivors (p. 216)) and other such depictions of his “ open minded”, liberal attitude. (” ‘We usually go to France…to keep in touch with languages and partly for a change'” (p. 216)), yet nevertheless, it is Gabriel who insists on the goloshes. ” ‘Goloshes!’ Said Mrs. Conroy. ‘That’s the latest. Whenever it’s wet underfoot I must put on my goloshes. To-night even, he wanted me to put them on…'” (p. 205). He

demonstrates the goloshes to be the newest thing. ” ‘ Goloshes…don’t you know what goloshes are? Gabriel says everyone wears them on the Continent.” (p. 205)It seems that it is Gabriel who wants to escape, and yet he is the very person insisting on the “ respectability.” He is a man who wears “ gilt rimmed glasses” that “ screen his restless eyes” (p. 203. He is restless and wants to escape, yet even his eyeglasses are covered by “ gilt”. (covering made to resemble gold, not even real gold, as if to show that “ respectability”, as desirable as it seems, is all a show) His desires to escape are screened by his own ties to “ respectability”. When he is nervous or feels out of control in a certain area, he tries to “ dispel by arranging his cuffs and the bows of his ties”(p. 203) or “ pat(s) his tie reassuringly”(p. 205). “ Respectability” is the protection Gabriel seeks from the very ideas of escape that he espouses. Gabriel’s inexplicable fascination with snow is another tool used by Joyce to create an atmosphere of fruitless escape. “ 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 out alone…the snow would be… forming a bright cap on the top…How much more pleasant it would be there than at the suppertable.”(p. 218-219). As Gabriel stares from the window (he is inside still, unable to escape outdoors) he is mesmerized by the falling snow. Whether it is to escape the stifling indoors to frolic in the free outside, or even to be like the snow, liberated, emancipated and free falling, Gabriel follows it with wistful eyes. Yet unbeknownst even to him, Gabriel is the very guilty party preventing his own absorption. “ He stood there on the mat, scraping the snow from his goloshes…He continued scraping his feet vigorously” (p. 201). He attempts to rid himself of this snow (a form of freedom and escape) by scraping it off his shoes (a mode for freedom and

escape). These signs of escape are being covered (as “ respectability” is just a cover) by goloshes (not real shoes, just a cover for shoes). Eventually, all that remains on him from the unshackled world of snow is a “ light fringe … lay like a cape on the shoulders of his overcoat and like toecaps on the toes of his goloshes.” Goloshes are merely shoes which cover other shoes, but by virtue of the fact that they cover, they serve as a division between the shoes (used to escape) and the snow (which represents escape), to the point of no escape. Gabriel is obviously interested in a world beyond his own, with his talk about travel (” every year I go for a cycling tour with some fellows” (p. 215)) and the constant subtle mentions of horses throughout the story (the horse named Johnny (p. 237), the horse on Winetavern St. (p. 245) etc), as both cycles and horses are means of grandiose escape, yet as much as he tries, he remains grounded in the society he attempts to escape. He says he is “ sick of my own country! Sick of it!”(p. 216)), yet in his own country he remains. The end of the story reconciles the dichotomous nature of Gabriel Conroy. When he hears about his wife Gretta’s first love, Michael Furey, he feels despondent and inadequate because he realizes that Michael Furey has surpassed him in one aspect that Gabriel could not reach. He has escaped. He will constantly remain a mystery to Gretta, and a source of envy to her husband. Gabriel stares at the clothes Gretta has flung on the floor as she sobs on her bed, and her boots catch his eye. “ One boot stood upright, its limp upper fallen down: the fellow of it lay upon its side.” (p. 254). The boots (another type of shoes – escape) are lying on the floor in their room, positioned very much like the couple. One like Gabriel, sitting upright, yet feeling helpless, the other like Gretta, lying down upon her side. They (neither the shoes nor the owners) are going nowhere. Gabriel is left to stare

in the cheval glass at his “ face whose expression always puzzled him when he saw it in the mirror, and his glimmering gilt-rimmed eyeglasses.” He doesn’t know his own face because the person inside who wishes to escape, is shadowed by his outside person who needs to remain, framed by gilt-rimmed glasses. Yet that outside person is still him. His own face is puzzling because of his own dichotomous nature. He cannot escape. Instead he is left to stare out of the window, where he “ watched sleepily the [snow]flakes…”(p. 255). Thoughts of journeys and newspapers flood his mind, but he stays inside, staring out. The ultimate failure of Gabriel Conroy to escape is thematic of all the stories in Dubliners. Yet while the other stories failed to have concrete endings, leaving the reader to suppose the future, “ The Dead” has a definitive ending. The internal references to each of the other stories serve as a conclusion to the entire book. Gabriel Conroy’s continuously upset attempts at escape from the Irish Catholic Society’s “ respectability” perhaps mirror all of the other characters throughout the collection, as (like it or not) “ respectability” remains the winner in its clash with the dream of escape and freedom.