

# Life and death in "dubliners" by james joyce



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Much of Dubliners revolves around the weary contemplation of mortality, the apex of which appears in the novel's endpiece, "The Dead," which serves as the perfect counterpart to "The Sisters," bookending the collection of stories with a cyclic emphasis on the intersection between life and death, recapitulating the central recurring themes of poverty, political division, paralysis, religion, and human transience. The novel opens with the macabre image of a dead priest in his coffin and closes with a thick blanket of snow falling over all the living and dead. Death has progressed from the individual to the universal, demonstrating the inescapability of the final human end.

Despite bleak imagery of "crooked crosses and headstones" there is a somber delicacy and sentimentality to the dark scene; the "beautiful death" described in "The Sisters" reaches a pinnacle in the melancholic beauty of the dark flakes of snow falling over the lonely land, and Gabriel's "soul swoon(s) slowly" as he meditates upon the poignantly silent night. The certainty of death unites all mankind - the snow is "general all over Ireland" and falls "upon all the living and the dead," removing all divisions between human beings as eventually, each and every one will reach the same fate.

The final paragraph of "The Dead" opens with a recurring gnomonic image of a figure gazing through a window; framed by uncertainty, watching, voyeuristically, his own life from the outside. The idea of the gnomon - a ghost of a missing form, an image incomplete - is a concept that anchors much of Dubliners, reflecting on the modernist sense of the unknown, of being lost in contemplation without quite understanding the hallucinatory world around. The stories are marked by a missing piece of information, an ellipsis in understanding, and the result is an esoteric sense of incompleteness,

a story left inconclusive, often both to the protagonist and to the reader.

Gabriel experiences such a realization in "The Dead" as he stumbles upon a missing segment of his wife Gretta's life, discovering that he was not in fact her first love, but rather she has been hiding a tragic romance, and he reflects that even now "perhaps she had not told him the whole story."

This challenge to Gabriel's self-assurance emphasises the failures of communication that recur throughout Dubliners and particularly "The Dead," precipitated throughout the Morkans' party through the awkward exchange with Lily and the argument with Miss Ivors, culminating in a realization of the distance between Gabriel and Gretta. While Gabriel spends the ride back to the hotel musing warmly about his wife and growing increasingly enraptured at the idea of spending a night alone with her, his illusionary romance is soon shattered by the discovery that she has in fact been harbouring thoughts not of Gabriel, but of Michael Furey. This creates an immense distance between the couple, a sense of being in two different worlds, which forces Gabriel to reflect on his role in Gretta's life, reaching a sobering conclusion of "what a poor part he had played."

Staring out the window at the silently falling snow, Gabriel experiences an epiphany, suddenly able to see his life with disheartening clarity. He recognizes himself as merely a shadow of a man, a lingering ghost that sifts through life without really living, and realizes that those who live passionately and die young - the Michael Fureys of the world - live more fully than muted silhouettes such as himself. He is, in a sense, more dead in fact than Michael Furey, who remains a shining memory in his wife's heart, continuing to exert an impact over the living. Gabriel understands in this

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moment that the distinction between the living and the dead that he proclaimed earlier is indeed false. The dead are very much a part of life, and Michael Furey in particular lives on more profoundly than he ever will. He too will eventually join the dead, become buried beneath the cold white blanket of ice, but he will be forgotten.

The passage reads with a distinctly soft Irish voice - a hushed breath, slurred together with slow, delicate movement of language and whispering sounds that emulate the falling of snow. This results in a sense of intense quiet, all action and thought hushed and dulled. The snow is illuminated only by diffused " lamplight" falling in " light taps," with everything happening " softly" and " faintly" in a diluted reality that he watches " sleepily" in that muted consciousness floating somewhere between wake and sleep. The nighttime setting of this moment underscores this surreal sense of nomadic reality, hovering in the ephemeral state of darkness that separates the life of one day from the next, the crevice between life and death. This darkness is emphasized through repetition of gloominess - " the flakes, silver and dark," " the dark central plain," and " the dark mutinous Shannon waves." The darkness above the ground seems to mirror the darkness below the ground, meditating on the intersection between the living and the dead; the universality of human fate.

The persistent repetition of the term " falling" throughout the passage - " falling obliquely," " falling softly," and " faintly falling" - creates a sense of relentlessness and almost suffocating deposition. Although the individual flakes rain down to earth gently, a sense of heaviness is suggested through the accumulation of soft patters that build up to create a blanket that " lies

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thickly" over the land. The coldness of the scene reflects on the numbness of Gabriel's character, yet seems to suggest that everyone is in fact as numb as he; this frozen state reaches everyone, uniting the living and dead, despite images of isolation, forlorn descriptions of "treeless hills," a "lonely churchyard" and "barren thorns," that create the impression of wrenchingly solitary experience. All individuals, Joyce suggests, are inherently alone and yet paradoxically united in their shared isolation.

Although Gabriel passively accepts the epiphany that he is already dead, there remains a fleeting glimmer of hope as he reflects that perhaps "the time had come for him to set out on his journey westward," an ephemeral hint at the possibility of changing his attitude, embracing life and disencumbering himself from the deadening routines of the past, immortalized in the Morkans' party, the monotonous rituals repeated year after year, like the horse circling around the mill. The snow, unusual even in January, cannot last forever - it, too, is as transient as life itself.