

# Snowy dead people – andrew walleck

Literature



" The Dead," a short story by James Joyce tells the story of an evening dinner party and the events immediately following said party. It takes place in Ireland, as do all the other stories in Dubliners and the story is loosely centralized on Gabriel; a pudgy, educated man who has attended this dinner party for many years running. The party is held by two sisters, Kate and Julia, the elder of whom is visibly near death. The attendants of the party are mostly upper-middle class, well-educated, patriotic Irishmen.

At the end of the story, Gabriel reaches an epiphany in terms of discovering the true relationship he holds with his wife. This epiphany, the use of the elements, and the clever selection of title all help present a central theme, which is the ability of the human emotion to transcend place and elements, and even death. In the story's final pages, Gabriel's wife admits to Gabriel that she once had another love in her life (notwithstanding that the other is now dead) named Michael Furey.

She then falls into a fitful sleep and Gabriel stays awake to attempt to contemplate. In his own words, Gabriel admits to himself that " He had never felt like that himself towards any woman," and that " he knew such a feeling must be love," (page 152. ) This outright acknowledgement of his inability to match what he feels for Gretta with what the deceased Michael Furey felt for his wife relates to a larger idea of Gabriel's sterility to outside emotion and lack of devices to cope with any level of interaction beyond the superficial.

The elements play a very important role in this story as symbolic of the inner workings of the characters they are involved with. In the beginning of the story, Gabriel dons a large overcoat and galoshes (regarded as slightly

extreme by other members of the party and his wife) to protect himself from the snow. As he walks in, he is described as a " snowman" - snow piled on his shoulders and head. This is an important connection, because Gabriel is later illustrated to be frigid, icy, and generally " cold" towards other people.

He is involved in his own little world, where he puts himself above most of the other attendants of the party - several times he considers changing his speech because he believes it to be too sophisticated for all in the room to appreciate. He snaps at Ms. Ivors when she continually presses him about his travels and reluctance to stay in Ireland; "'O, to tell you the truth,' retored Gabriel suddenly, 'I'm sick of my own country, sick of it!! '" (page 129. ) And, he seethes for quite awhile after she jokingly accuses him of being a " West Briton.

His coldness is also shown in his feelings toward his wife; when he hears about what real love must be, he can't even begin to relate. Near the end of the story, however, is where an important revelation is made (augmenting the realization Gabriel has already made. ) After forcibly being exposed to real feelings and emotion from his wife, he is also forcibly exposed to the elements: (limited as they may be inside a hotel room) " The air in the room chilled his shoulders.

He stretched himself cautiously along the sheets and lay down beside his wife," (page 152. So instead of pulling on an overcoat or bundling up in some other way like the Gabriel in the beginning of the story would, he allows himself to be exposed and deals with the cold. This compassion allows Gabriel to " move" beyond the hotel room, as we see at the end of the story

his viewpoint pulls back to take into full view all that surrounds him instead of limiting his view to only himself, as he seems accustomed: " He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward.

Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves... " Another important use of the elements is when the audience " sees" Michael Furey. We see him as imagined by Gabriel: " The tears gathered more thickly in his eyes and in the partial darkness he imagined he saw the form of a young man standing under a dripping tree".

This outright exposition to the elements to proclaim his love (love that is so strong, he does not wish life if he cannot have it) stands in direct contrast to the bundled up, protected image of Gabriel. Instead of fortifying himself against the elements as Gabriel would, Michael bears their full brunt. Also, the image of a " dripping tree," associated with Michael Furey stands in contrast to the image of a " snowman," associated with Gabriel. A dripping tree, covered in water and literally overflowing with life and fertility represents the depth and extremity of the emotion held by Michael, which he focused on Greta.

A snowman, cold and sterile like the frozen water that it is composed of is a fitting image for Gabriel- sterile and foreboding. The thematic significance of the title " The Dead" is that it enunciates both main characters, (Gabriel and Michael) meaning that it can be used as an adjective for both of them.

Gabriel, though physically alive, is (until the very end of the story) emotionally "dead." This is a bit extreme of a description and Gabriel is by no means a heartless monster, but he is emotionally quite dead until he can be seen to emotionally come alive at the end of the story.

Michael Furey on the other hand, who is physically dead, is very much emotionally alive at the end of the story when he becomes the central focus of both Gabriel and Greta. The title also illustrates another theme of the story; that the dead aren't as distant from us as we may think. Though we may still roam the earth as they lay beneath it, some of those who walk the earth are in some ways dead already, and in many ways the dead are "alive" in our world - we owe our existence to those who have come before us and they live in our memories.

Also, the observation that "snow was general all over Ireland," upon "all the living and the dead," (page 152,) serves to physically link the two, and augments the connection previously mentioned. Another image in the story's close worth examining is the graveyard seen in the final paragraph: "It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns.

The image of a cross- upon which the Catholic God Jesus Christ was martyred is a link to the death of Michael Furey- he martyred himself for the sake of Greta's love. So in conclusion, the somewhat ambiguous but clever use of title, the epiphany that Gabriel reaches and the imagery of the elements all contribute to the overriding theme of the ability of the human beings'

emotion to transcend place and elements, and even death. The final image of the graveyard and the use of title also contribute to a more minor but still present theme of the proximity between the living and the dead.