

## “Falling through the universe”: the transformative power of language in James Joyce’s *The dead*

### ABSTRACT

James Joyce’s *The Dead* is recognized as a stepping stone towards the author’s more experimental fiction, as the end of the story foregrounds its own linguistic construction. In this paper I argue that Joyce also manages to subvert the power relations associated with language by his use of two particular leitmotifs: *snow* and *music*, which serve “oppositional” functions against the subjugating ideologies of everyday language and convention. Snow and music represent negations of or “flights” from language and its essentially controlling nature, its ability to shape and subjugate consciousness and identity. I argue that *The Dead* resists easy consumption and, as the story unravels and finally deconstructs itself – leaving the snow “falling faintly through the universe” – we, as readers, are left to contemplate the mysteries of identity, memory, romantic love and the seductive power of poetic language.

**KEYWORDS:** James Joyce. *Dubliners*. *The Dead*. Gabriel Conroy. Modernism.

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The fictional writer Elizabeth Costello in J.M. Coetzee's novel of the same name makes an interesting observation whilst being interviewed on the radio. The interviewer suggests that the great novels of the past can be re-read in the light of new, radical discourses, and that the lives and voices of the characters can be "reclaimed" in a liberating fashion. Elizabeth tentatively agrees, but then appears to change her mind: "But, seriously, we can't go on parasitizing the classics for ever. I am not excluding myself from the charge. We've got to start doing some inventing of our own." (COETZEE, p. 9)

James Joyce's collection of short stories, *Dubliners*, is a classic text that has been "parasitized" on a grand scale. As Florence Walzl reminded us more than thirty years ago, "there are now over one hundred studies analysing individual *Dubliners* stories. In these explications it is common to find major images of the tales treated as metaphors carrying literary, historical, or psychological overtones". (BENSTOCK, p. 117) The last and longest story in Joyce's collection, *The Dead*, has commanded particular attention as a haunting character-study; a tale of self-deception and personal enlightenment which closes with a poetic vision of death and rebirth. It also can be seen as a stepping stone towards Joyce's more experimental fiction, as the end of the story foregrounds its own linguistic construction; as realism fades into poetry, the reader is left to meditate on the transformative power of language.

In this essay I will compare and contrast four different readings of *The Dead*, but I think it is important at this stage to justify my attempt to perform another reading of this classic text, a story which has already attained iconic status. Roland Barthes makes a distinction between 'readerly' and 'writerly' texts in his book *S/Z*. A 'readerly' text hides the (mimetic) devices which produce the illusion of realism and this allows the reader to be a passive consumer of the story. In contrast, the 'writerly' text forces the reader to examine his or her own act of reading: the text is open, dynamic and defiant, frustrating attempts to see through the language into a parallel world. (BARTHES, p. 4) I would suggest *The Dead* is such a text. It resists easy consumption and, as the story unravels and finally deconstructs itself – leaving the snow "falling faintly through the universe" – we, as readers, must contemplate the mysteries of identity, memory, romantic love and the seductive power of poetic language.

The four readings I have chosen to examine are by Laurence Davies in his introduction to the Wordsworth Classics edition of *Dubliners* (2001), Terry Eagleton from his book *The English Novel* (2005), William Johnsen from an essay in *James Joyce and Modern Literature* (1982) and Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle from their book *Literature, Criticism and Theory* (2009).

There are a number of thematic elements in *Dubliners* which most critical studies consider to be key aspects of an informed interpretation. Joyce, in a letter to his publisher Grant Richards, mentions two of these elements:

My intention was to write a chapter of the moral history of my country and I chose Dublin for the scene because that city seemed to me the centre of *paralysis*...I have written it for the most part in a style of *scrupulous meanness* and with the conviction that he is a very bold man who dares to alter in the presentment, still more to deform, whatever he has seen and heard" (my italics). (JOHNSEN, p. 7)

The characters in Joyce's stories are held fast by the "paralysing" effect of Dublin city life, subjugated by the ideologies of church and state: "Work is drudgery, politics a farce, religion either empty ritual or a form of madness, and domestic life a prison...Shame, guilt, rage, violence and humiliation simmer beneath the threadbare surfaces of social life." (EAGLETON, p. 298). Eagleton describes "scrupulous meanness" as a kind of "neutral realism" which reflects the stagnation and sparseness of the characters' lives. Joyce's style is "a deliberately flattened, anaemic, economical style which captures what he saw as the 'spiritual paralysis' of his city and his country." (EAGLETON, p. 299).

A third thematic element is the notion of "epiphany": that Joyce intended the stories to contain moments of spiritual enlightenment or transcendence. Laurence Davies describes this effect as "a moment of ecstasy, of the sudden revelation of truth, taking its name from the moment the Three Wise Men beheld the infant Christ." (DAVIES, p. xvii). But Eagleton suggests there is a sense in which the stories in *Dubliners* hinge on what he calls "anti-epiphanies". Most of the stories, Eagleton suggests, "focus on some ambition not achieved, some vision or desire frustrated, some key moment which turns out to be sourly disenchanting." (EAGLETON, p. 298) Indeed, as we shall see with the four readings of *The Dead*, the final story in *Dubliners* in some senses subverts this thematic pattern of "paralysis", "scrupulous meanness" and "epiphany".

In his assessment of *The Dead*, Laurence Davies suggests that the leitmotif of "paralysis" which runs through the stories in *Dubliners* is suspended for Joyce's final story: "This longer story ends not with another frustration, another stoppage, but with a famously lyrical rendering of snow, rarely and remarkably blanketing the whole island and its inhabitants, alive or dead." (DAVIES p. xvii) Davies also claims that Joyce's use of language at the end of the story is no longer "scrupulously mean" but visionary, signalling "movement, change, enlargement, the unfolding of a great set-piece about transcendence". (DAVIES, p. xvii) This visionary and transcendent moment appears to sit very well with the notion of "epiphany": the idea that Gabriel Conroy experiences a life-enhancing moment of great import, "a moment of ecstasy, of the sudden revelation of truth". (DAVIES, p. xvii) But Davies quotes Joyce's own definition of epiphany as "revelation of the whatness of a thing", a moment when "the soul of the commonest object...seems to us radiant" (DAVIES, p. xvii) and suggests that this neither encapsulates the rapture of the falling snow, nor the drifting, dreamlike consciousness of Gabriel at the end of the story.

Many of the characters in *Dubliners* experience moments of enlightenment, of escape from their mundane surroundings which could be characterised as "epiphanic", but Davies argues that these moments are not enough in themselves to make any significant change to their lives. In this sense, the "epiphanic" is inextricably linked to "paralysis" in the sense that, despite the revelation of truth, the paralysing power of Dublin life is too strong to allow the characters to be liberated from their circumstances. In the case of Gabriel Conroy, however, Davies believes the final paragraph is evidence that the character is destined to experience a rebirth in his relationship with Gretta, that the revelations he has just been exposed to will somehow make the marriage stronger: "Now that he knows something more of Gretta's real sadness, now that the story of dead, passionate, Michael Furey has dropped into his mind, his sense of human existence will be broader." (DAVIES, p. xviii)

Davies positions himself within a historical seam of critical debate focusing on Gabriel Conroy, though clearly offering his own alternative interpretation of the character:

There is a long critical tradition of being hard on Gabriel Conroy, of censuring him for lust, insincerity, inadequate patriotism, or all three. The trouble with this tradition is its easiness...Gabriel takes a sterner line with himself than any other character in any of the stories; the awareness of moral and imaginative inadequacy comes from his own standpoint. However reprehensible he may be...he takes cognisance of his failings. (DAVIES, p. xviii)

Terry Eagleton also defends Gabriel Conroy, but his assessment of the main character in *The Dead* appears after an openly political interpretation of Joyce's work, with a particular focus on the linguistic fabrication of Joyce's fiction:

Joyce uses typographical devices in his work to draw attention to the fact that his books are books. They are material objects which somehow give the illusion of speech...he is fascinated by the way in which inanimate black marks on white sheets can somehow become living human meanings. (EAGLETON, p. 289)

Eagleton highlights the modernist elements of Joyce's fiction, claiming that such an art form must, out of historical necessity, change from "representing the world, to representing our ways of representing it", and that "*Dubliners* is less a plain style than a parody of a plain style." (EAGLETON, p. 288) In this way Joyce deliberately absolves himself from pronouncing judgement on his characters by employing a style which, at the same time, subverts the impulse of the reader to make moral interpretations of the stories: "In its blank, bloodless fashion, [*Dubliners*] deliberately offers no comment on the material it presents, least of all a moralizing one." (EAGLETON, p. 299)

Eagleton and Davies both follow a critical tradition that has perceived of Gabriel Conroy as bearing more than a passing similarity to his author<sup>1</sup>. Perhaps for this reason alone, there has been a plethora of critical debate about the character. Eagleton believes Joyce may be laying a false trail for the reader with Gabriel Conroy by deliberately revealing his crippling insecurity. At the beginning of the story, he is already having serious doubts about his speech:

He would only make himself ridiculous by quoting poetry to them which they could not understand. They would think that he was airing his superior education. He would fail with them just as he had failed with the girl in the pantry [...] His whole speech was a mistake from first to last, an utter failure. (JOYCE, p. 129)

By finding this assessment of the character early in the story, the reader could reasonably assume that the "utter failure" of Gabriel's speech could be indicative of his "utter failure" as a husband or nephew: the character is already exposed as flawed, unable to trust his own judgement. When Gretta compounds Gabriel's self-doubt by revealing her love for Michael Furey, her romantic passion can be read as something truer and purer than Gabriel's posturing and pretensions. But Eagleton differs here: "Even when Gretta has dropped the bombshell of her past love for Furey, Gabriel's response to her is generous,

pitying and affectionate. He is far from the fatuous clown he imagines himself to be.” (EAGLETON, p. 301)

Eagleton argues, in fact, that Gretta’s declaration of love can be seen as a “morbid fixation on the past, as she overlooks a living passion in the name of a dead one.” (EAGLETON, p. 301) Despite his openly Marxist bias, Eagleton is an apologist for the close reading of literary texts, an approach which doesn’t exclude debate about the behaviour of characters in fiction. He senses in Gretta’s passionate hotel-room outburst, an attempt by Joyce to highlight the folly of her sentimentality. In this way, Eagleton is able to be more objective about the text and produce a “political” reading of the scene: “Both [Gretta] and her West-of-Ireland lover may exemplify the cult of nostalgia and futile self-sacrifice which Joyce detested so deeply in Irish nationalism.” From getting under the skin of the characters, Eagleton is able to suddenly distance himself from the action and produce an ideological, historical reading. He closes his assessment by suggesting that Gabriel’s self-doubting (which could, of course, reflect some of the moral dilemma’s experienced by Joyce himself) is enough to make him misjudge the spuriousness of Greta’s passion: “Perhaps Gabriel is finally duped by this false but forceful image into despairing of his own life, in which case he may be doing himself a serious injustice.” (EAGLETON, p. 301)

Eagleton’s overall assessment of Joyce’s fiction is based on the premise that his writing was a self-conscious response to Ireland’s position as a colonised nation. In a sense, Joyce’s “modernism” is not the indication of a rarefied aesthetic voice, but a natural reaction to a situation in which the coloniser’s language has become the dominant medium of communication. Joyce’s fiction may be peppered with Irish idioms and idiosyncrasies, and his subjects may be intensely Irish – the Catholic Church, Irish politics, myths and superstitions – but the only language at his disposal is that of the coloniser: English. And it is the historical moment of Joyce’s work, a time when the Irish republican movement was growing in strength prior to the 1916 Easter Rising, which gives it a political dimension:

Language in Ireland had always been a political and cultural minefield, as the tongue of the colonialist vied with the despised discourse of the natives. In a nation where you could move between several kinds of speech (Irish, English, Hiberno-English, Ulster Scots and so on), writers were more likely to be aware of the problematic nature of language than those who, like the English, could take their so-called mother tongue for granted. Language in such situations is less a transparent medium than an object of concern and contention in its own right. And this aligns it with modernism rather than with realism. (EAGLETON, p. 287)

It was Joyce’s acute awareness of the non-neutrality of the language he used to write his fictions which led to the development of his parodying, ironic, self-conscious style: a style by which the narrator could distance himself from the characters and the action and let the language itself take centre-stage. As Samuel Beckett once said of Joyce’s work: “His writing is not *about* something; *it is that something itself.*” (BECKETT, p. 27)

One of the criticisms levelled at modernist fiction is that experiments with style and technique take precedence over other important considerations:

character analysis, psychological depth, tensions in the plot and so on. Or, to simplify the difference, form is esteemed over content. It could be argued then, that “meaning” is demoted in favour of style. When the language calls attention to itself, the reader is prevented from making the easy passage to the storyline: mimesis is held in check and the illusion of realism frustrated. For modernism to succeed then, the language has to be invested with an aesthetic potency which is as satisfying to the reader as the allure of realism. One of the ways this can be achieved is by the use of poetic language; sensuous language that appeals to the reader through sound, rhythm and allusion. The last paragraph of *The Dead* is an example of this heightened use of language. William Johnsen argues that the last story in *Dubliners* is a vital link between the “scrupulous meanness” of the earlier stories and Joyce’s later, more experimental fiction. In *The Dead*, he argues, Joyce was able to exploit the limitations of modernist technique and produce an authentic, poetic voice: “Joyce’s writing of *The Dead*, and the revision of *Stephen Hero* into *A Portrait*, reveal to us how Joyce, like the other major modern writers, worked his way out of the futility of modernism.” (JOHNSEN, p. 6)

For Johnsen, certain forms of modernist technique are “futile” because they rely too heavily on distance: on the “superior” posturing of irony, satire and caricature. This not only removes any sense of moral obligation on the part of the writer, it also infuses fiction with a kind of “rivalry”. For the ironist to succeed, the reader must grasp the significance of knowing “truths” that the characters are unable to understand. In this sense, irony relies on a potential victim. Johnsen sees the futility of the plight of the characters in *Dubliners* as matched by the futility of the modern, ironic style that Joyce employs: form and content merge, but the effect can be one of cold detachment and unresolved differences. Gabriel presumes that Gretta has been comparing him to Michael Furey and this compounds his sense of inadequacy to the extent that he becomes the victim of what Johnsen calls “self-hatred”. But he distances himself from Gretta by insincerity: “He did not wish her to think that he was interested in this delicate boy.” (*Dubliners*, p. 157) Here is Johnsen’s assessment of this distancing:

Here we see, as in all great modern writers, how the local dynamics of futility are affiliated to the futility of modernism. Irony is the technique of modern rivalry, and a defeated rival is necessary to the ironist’s sense of superiority. To be defeated, in turn, is to think of oneself as a vanquished rival, to be exposed as a mere imitator or follower.” (JOHNSEN, p. 19)

Johnsen invests the word “imitation” with particular significance. Modernism has pretensions to be always original, so the modernist writer can easily become a slave to technique: he or she must be forever renewing their style. But he also suggests that characters in fiction are also potential victims of irony, as in the case of Gabriel Conroy, who misreads the rueful sentimentality of his wife Gretta. Johnsen wants to reinstate “imitation” as a vital alternative to the kind of irony that subverts moral engagement:

To deny imitation is to deny [...] the one instinct essential for culture. In so far as modernism proposes a self-born, self-begotten originality that mocks or vanquishes imitators or rivals, that screens its own imitation, it perverts the Scene of Education, wastes the past, and hands on only a technique for futility. (JOHNSEN, p. 19)

Johnsen suggests that, through Gabriel Conroy, Joyce is able to resolve the tensions of irony, distance, “rivalry” and the “futility” of modernist technique: “*The Dead* disintegrates Joyce’s obsession in satire, frees his mind from his mind’s bondage to the futile dynamics of modernism.” (JOHNSEN, p. 17) The key notion here is that Gabriel changes. His initial reaction to Gretta’s story of Michael Furey is perhaps understandable: he feels betrayed, belittled and this compounds his insecurity and tendency towards self-criticism. Later, however, after Gretta falls asleep, Gabriel reacts with greater emotional understanding and sympathy for his wife’s sadness: “Generous tears filled Gabriel’s eyes. He had never felt like that towards any woman, but he knew that such a feeling must be love.” (*Dubliners*, p. 160) Moments later, in the final paragraph, Gabriel contemplates going to the west of Ireland: “The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward.” (*Dubliners*, p. 160) This is a journey that he has previously poured scorn upon twice: once through his encounter with Molly Ivors at the party and a second time when Gretta urges him to take heed of Miss Ivors’ suggestion as she (Gretta) would “love to see Galway again”. This notion of going west can be seen as a symbolic acceptance of “old Ireland” with its traditions and folklore, a sentiment that Gabriel finds difficult because of his educated, middle-class sympathies with Europe and the European style. Johnsen also reads Gabriel’s ultimate reaction to Michael Furey as one of acceptance; that he is able to embrace his wife’s feelings for her old lover and contemplate a new future. In this sense, the notion of a “victim” – through, irony, satire or parody – is replaced by empathy and a kind of mutual identification between the characters which expands to include the whole of humanity.

Gabriel’s positive reciprocity with his rival prompts his ‘journey westward’. *The Dead* is Joyce’s first attempt at imagining a non-sacrificial society. The tone of the last section, balanced between fear and the loss of differences, and the joy of at last merging with Ireland and all its people, urges us unreluctantly to identify with all the living and the dead. (JOHNSEN, p. 20)

Joyce’s inventive and carefully considered use of language is evidence that the titles he gives to his stories will have several possible connotations. It follows that “*The Dead*” is unlikely to signify merely the passing of Michael Furey but will have greater thematic significance. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle suggest *The Dead* is not only concerned with human death but with the death of language itself. One of the clues is in the very first line of the story: “Lily, the caretaker’s daughter, was literally run off her feet.” (*Dubliners*, p. 127) A closer examination of the sentence will reveal that it does not actually make any sense. If Lily was merely “run off her feet” we would interpret this in the figurative sense that she was running around very busily. But Joyce makes a mockery of the metaphor by the use of the word “literally”, which would normally mean factually rather than figuratively. In this sense he not only draws attention to the precariousness of language from the very beginning, he also initiates a kind of “deconstruction” of the text which has thematic potency for the rest of the story: “[...] the opening sentence to the story produces a play of figuration which refers indirectly both to the subject of the story, death, and to its telling [...] *The Dead*, which is above all about death, is also about dead language, dead metaphors.” (BENNETT & ROYLE, p. 86) Bennett and Royle suggest that, as readers of fiction, we have become desensitized to figures, tropes and metaphors because only in

this way are we able to “look through” the language to experience the mimetic effect of realism. In *The Dead*, Joyce wants to force the reader to notice the artifice with which the writer and the reader are complicit.

In their examination of the final paragraph of the story, Bennett and Royle discover that the word “falling” is used seven times: “falling obliquely, falling, falling softly, softly falling, falling, falling faintly, faintly falling” (BENNETT & ROYLE p. 87). Through this repetition, Joyce is able to achieve a number of effects. “Falling” can be interpreted literally – the snow was falling outside the window of the hotel where Gabriel and Gretta are staying – and figuratively, in the sense that meaning itself is “falling” or “fading” as Gabriel starts to fall asleep and drift into unconsciousness:

This verbal repetition produces a mesmeric sense of descent, sleep, fading and death. What Joyce appears to be evoking here, through figurative effects of language – repetition, alliteration, assonance and sibilance, syntactic inversion or chiasmus (‘falling faintly, faintly falling’) – is a fading out, a falling off, of language itself. *The Dead* is about the death of (figurative *and* literal) language. (BENNETT & ROYLE, p. 87)

There is a sense, however, in which Joyce is deliberately trying to represent this “fading out” or disappearance of language while at the same time drawing the reader’s attention not to the “futility” of language but to its power: stories are how we make sense of the world and they rely upon metaphor and figurative language for their construction.

In *The Dead* both Gabriel and Gretta are moved and motivated emotionally by the power of stories: Gretta by revisiting the tragedy of Michael Furey and Gabriel by the dialogue he conducts with himself about his pretensions, desires and shared life with Gretta. But according to Bennett and Royle, there is also an important ideological dimension to the relationship between stories and how they are used to control people and situations. The authors suggest that Gretta uses the story of Michael Furey to “diffuse” Gabriel’s ardour and thereby resist his unwanted sexual advances:

[...] perhaps the end of Joyce’s narrative should be understood in terms of the diffusion of Gabriel’s egoistic, domineering and even rapacious desire for his wife by Gretta’s narration of her love story. Gretta, subject to patriarchal society’s insistence on the husband’s rights to the wife’s body, displaces her husband’s unwanted attention by telling him a story. (BENNETT & ROYLE, pp 59-60)

In this way, the power of stories becomes one of the central themes of *The Dead*. There is a sense in which each of the characters in the story is “known” or understood by the stories that are told by them and about them. For example, the two aunts – Kate and Julia – are nervously awaiting the arrival of Freddy Malins because of his reputation, an image that depends upon all the stories told and heard about him; stories that depend less on factual accuracy and more on interpretation and prejudice. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration, therefore, to suggest that a whole “mythology” has evolved based on the drinking exploits of Freddy Malins. In this sense, *The Dead* depends upon and is generated by the stories that take place within it: “This conflict of stories – Gabriel’s about himself



and Gretta's about her dead lover – results in a disturbance of power relations. In this sense [...] *The Dead* is self-reflectively about the power of stories." (BENNETT & ROYLE, p. 60)

Bennett and Royle apply Joyce's notion of "epiphany" in their reading of the final paragraph of the story. This follows an analysis of narrative and its possible constituents, including temporality, linearity, point of view, desire and power. In *The Dead* they see a thematic relationship between death and storytelling, in the sense that both stories and images of death have power within the narrative and that Joyce is able to alter the dynamic of the story by stressing one or other of these thematic elements at certain moments in the story.

Joyce's storytelling holds off, and hangs on, death. As the snow falls on the world outside the window at the end of the story, as Gabriel falls into unconsciousness and the narrative slips away, there is another moment of epiphany, a dissolution of time, of space, of life, of identity, desire and narrative. (BENNETT & ROYLE, p. 61)

Here we see that death is equated with the end of storytelling, the end of narrative, and that identity is constituted by stories. But this is also evidence of the transformative power of language, through stories and shifting identities, and through the changing interpretations of those stories and those identities. As Gabriel drifts into a dream-like state, language and identity may fade out, as Bennett and Royle suggest, but dreams have their own language: in the morning, presumably, Gabriel will awaken to more stories, more interpretation of signs, of language. Ireland will also remain, not just as a physical place, but as a point at which cultures and narratives clash in the struggle for power, the ideological power which underpins all uses of language.

I want to suggest other ways in which Joyce manages to subvert the power relations associated with language by his use of two particular leitmotifs in *The Dead*. The first is the presence and recurring image of snow throughout the story, an image which has several connotations: nature, purity, freedom and silence; snow can also represent death and, by association, life. The second is music, which can also symbolize freedom (and escape) from language, but also has strong emotional connotations. In *The Dead*, both snow and music can be seen in opposition to language and its associations with ideology and convention. In my reading of *The Dead*, snow and music become negations of or "flights" from language and its essentially controlling nature, its ability to shape and subjugate consciousness and identity. As we have seen through Eagleton's commentary, Joyce had to write in English but was fully conscious of that language's political dimensions as the "tongue of the colonialist". For Joyce, far from being a neutral medium, the English language was an "object of concern and contention" (EAGLETON, p. 287) and it is reasonable to assume he would attempt to find ways of illuminating areas "outside" its all-encompassing power.

The first hint of the symbolic significance of snow appears when Gabriel arrives at the party and begins to remove his outdoor attire:

A light fringe of snow lay like a cape on the shoulders of his overcoat and like toecaps on the toes of his galoshes; and, as the buttons of his overcoat slipped with a squeaking noise from the snow-stiffened

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frieze, a cold, fragrant air from out-of-doors escaped from crevices and folds. (*Dubliners*, p. 128)

Here snow is associated with the “fragrant air” from outside which is *trapped* inside the coat but then escapes into the house. Both the snow and the outdoor air can be seen here as alien to the indoor life of polite society, culture and human communication. Later, as he stands by the window of the drawing room, Gabriel compares the anxious prospect of delivering his supper-table speech with the freedom of exploring the snow-covered landscape outside:

How cool it must be outside! How pleasant it would be to walk out alone, first along by the river and then through the park! The snow would be lying on the branches of the trees and forming a bright cap on the top of the Wellington Monument. How much more pleasant it would be there than at the supper table! (*Dubliners*, p. 138)

The exclamation marks infuse Gabriel’s daydream with a naïve, childish and yet thrilling vitality which is juxtaposed with the tense prospect of his dutiful speech. The snow is not deadening the earth but “bright” and alive, highlighting the beauty of the river, the park and the monument, and offering a kind of romantic escape from dull, indoor society.

These tantalizing images of an imagined outdoors are repeated when Gabriel stands up at the table, just seconds before beginning his speech:

People, perhaps, were standing in the snow on the quay outside, gazing up at the lighted windows and listening to the waltz music. The air was pure there. In the distance lay the park where the trees were weighted with snow. The Wellington Monument wore a gleaming cap of snow that flashed westward over the white field of Fifteen Acres. (*Dubliners*, p. 145)

The snow is “pure”, “white” and “gleaming”, suggesting an enticing escape route from Gabriel’s familial duty. This purity contrasts sharply with the content of Gabriel’s speech, which is unavoidably contrived and full of potential pitfalls. Here the burdensome and value-laden connotations of language which force Gabriel to self-consciously expose himself in a formal speech are pitted against the white open spaces outside where the air is “pure” and silent and one is free of judgement by others.

Images of snow also dominate the celebrated final paragraph of *The Dead*. Gretta is asleep and Gabriel has slipped into bed beside her and is about to fall asleep when he turns to the window to watch the snow falling: “He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight [...] snow was general all over Ireland.” After listing some of the places near and remote where the snow is falling, including the graveyard where Gretta’s childhood sweetheart Michael Furey is buried, Joyce ends the story with a ‘transcendental’ and poetically-charged sentence: “[Gabriel’s] 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.” With these final images Joyce dispenses with any previous inference of realism in the story. The sibilance of “soul swooned slowly” highlights its poetic form and takes the focus off the “meaning” of the phrase: the idea of a soul swooning slowly is purely imaginary,

but it matches perfectly the other-worldly dimension that the presence of the snow is producing in Gabriel's imagination. This dramatic shift into a nebulous, dream-like state is encapsulated by the following phrase: "...he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe..." In this image, we are confronted with the dubious idea, in realism terms, that Gabriel is able to "hear" the snow falling, not outside the window, but "through the universe". Snow is not only "pure", "cold" and "white", as we have seen, it also has the power to cover everything, everywhere; a natural force that is expansive, arbitrary and non-judgemental; representing freedom, sleep and, ultimately, death.

Music also has important thematic elements in *The Dead*. When Aunt Julia sings an air for the party guests, Gabriel listens with great attention: "To follow the voice, without looking at the singer's face, was to feel and share the excitement of swift and secure flight." (*Dubliners*, p. 139) Here the idea of "swift and secure flight" suggests a kind of escape, as if music has the power to transcend the language of consciousness, allowing Gabriel a moment of aesthetic pleasure which is "outside" the humdrum of the party. After Aunt Julia's recital, Freddy Malins is so taken by the performance that he dashes over to her and expresses his admiration: "I never heard you sing so well, never. No, I never heard your voice so good as it is tonight. [...] I never heard your voice sound so fresh and so...so clear and fresh, never." (*Dubliners*, p. 139) Despite Aunt Julia's age, her voice is "fresh" and "clear", suggesting that her singing voice is somehow ageless; that through music the listener is elevated to an aesthetic realm that is timeless, not bound by the restrictions of language and its controlling, subjugating force.

Perhaps the most significant instance of music and the role it plays in *The Dead* comes after the party when Gretta stops on the staircase, captivated by the sound of an air (song) coming from the drawing room. Gabriel notices her from the foot of the staircase and his imagination is stimulated:

There was a grace and mystery in her attitude as if she were a symbol of something. He asked himself what is a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow, listening to distant music, a symbol of. If he were a painter he would paint her in that attitude. [...] *Distant Music* he would call the picture if he were a painter. (*Dubliners*, p. 151)

Here music has the power almost to mortify Gretta, so transfixed is she by the romantic song she hears from another room. Later we realise that the song has evoked such strong feelings in Gretta that she becomes tearful and unresponsive to Gabriel's amorous advances; ironically, though the song and its listener are represented in Gabriel's imagination as "*Distant Music*", the song is very real and close, building an emotional wall between the couple. In fact, the song, *The Lass Of Aghrim*, is a powerful symbol of love; a kind of "pure" or spiritual love that existed between Gretta and her childhood sweetheart Michael Furey (who used to sing the song to Gretta) and which Joyce uses in *The Dead* both as a means of irrevocably changing the mood of the story and as a prelude to the dramatic, metaphysical fallout of the last paragraph.

I would suggest there is a thematic link between snow and music in *The Dead*. Both symbolize a kind of purity and offer a "flight" of freedom, an escape from a world delineated by language and convention. In the final paragraph, the snow is falling "all over Ireland" including "upon every part of the lonely

churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried.” (Dubliners, p. 160) For Gabriel, the “pure” snow falling outside the window is beautiful in its power to cover everything with white, changing everything, but at the same time allowing the possibility of redemption and renewal. For Gretta, *The Lass Of Aughrim* is beautiful in its power to invoke feelings of love and a sentimental nostalgia for Galway, the old Ireland where she grew up. In *The Dead*, both snow and music have aesthetic qualities which make them appear as forces “outside” ordinary human communication; they also have the power to get “beyond” the narrative and change the direction of the story, transporting the characters to imaginary worlds which are, if anything, more powerful and more real than the shared experience of everyday living.

There is an important irony here. Joyce creates the sense of these imaginary worlds, which are somehow “outside” the language of consciousness, through his carefully chosen use of words. He uses words – the building bricks of language and the discourses by which we interpret the world – to somehow point beyond the limitations of their prescriptive meaning. The great achievement of *The Dead* is its reification of language precisely in order to reach outside the conceptual world it delineates. Joyce highlights the aesthetic qualities of language most noticeably when he uses the figurative effects of poetry – repetition, alliteration, assonance and sibilance – in the final paragraph. This foregrounds the language while at the same time demonstrating its transformative power: poetic writing can bring pleasure to the reader through its sonic and graphic texture, its disconnectedness; but it can also allude to, or connect with, something transcendent and revolutionary.

*The Dead*, as I hope to have shown, is a classic “writerly” text (what Barthes calls “scriptible”) of subtlety and complexity that rewards repeated readings and new interpretative approaches. What makes the narrative dynamic is less its claims to realism, and more its exposition of the formal devices we expect from modernism: Joyce’s poetic effects rise to the surface in the final paragraph and, as readers, we are left with a kind of shimmering, universal vision. There is a sense in which we are all “falling through the universe”, moving through space and time, moving closer to death, a death which Joyce portrays not as a sacrifice of life but an adventure into the unknown. It is *The Dead* which ends *Dubliners* and signals a significant departure for its author. From the “scrupulous realism” and “paralysis” of the early stories, Joyce takes a metaphysical leap into the unknown with *The Dead*, but without losing sight of his central theme: Dublin. As Eagleton reminds us, “Joyce was the man who forged a mythology [...] out of a stagnant, preindustrial, priest-ridden colonial capital, and in doing so placed it permanently on the global map.” (EAGLETON, p. 284)

Along with Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus, Gabriel Conroy takes his place as a central character in Joyce’s unique vision of Dublin city life. What the character symbolises, however, is a shift of focus for Joyce’s literary art. At the end of *The Dead*, Gabriel “falls” like the snow, descending from consciousness to a dreamlike state, as he imagines that love is pure, like the snow and the song *The Lass of Aughrim*, and that the universe is vast and beyond judgement, tolerant of all the living and the dead. In parallel with this Romantic vision, the end of the story for Joyce signals his flight from “scrupulous realism”, as language begins to lose its referential, neutral status, and becomes a powerful symbolic medium, at once transcendental and concrete. From this point forward, Joyce

was to make language itself the central theme of his writing, taking precedence over character and plot, devices which inevitably give rise to moral interpretations in realist fiction. In a sense, *The Dead* represents the “death” of one phase of Joyce’s writing, and contains within it the seeds of the literary revolution which he pioneered with his later works.

## “Tombando universo abaixo”: o poder transformador da linguagem em *The dead* por James Joyce

### RESUMO

*The Dead* por James Joyce é reconhecido como um trampolim para a ficção mais experimental do autor, pois o fim do conto coloca em primeiro plano a sua própria construção linguística. Neste artigo defendo que Joyce também consegue subverter as relações de poder associadas com a linguagem por seu uso de dois leitmotifs particulares: *neve* e *música*, que servem de oposição às ideologias subjugantes da linguagem cotidiana e da convenção. Neve e música representam negações ou voos contra a linguagem e sua natureza essencialmente controladora, sua capacidade de moldar e subjugar a consciência e a identidade. Defendo que *The Dead* resiste consumo fácil e, como a história se desenrola e, finalmente, se desconstrói - deixando a neve "falling faintly through the universe" – nós, como leitores, somos levados a contemplar os mistérios da identidade, memória, o amor romântico e o poder de sedução da linguagem poética.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** James Joyce. *Dubliners*. *The Dead*. Gabriel Conroy. Modernismo.

## NOTAS

<sup>1</sup>See DAVIES, p. xvi, and EAGLETON, p. 301. See also PARRINDER, Patrick. **James Joyce**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 66, where Parrinder writes: "Gabriel, who like Joyce has fallen in love with a country girl from Galway, is probably a fantasy-projection of the novelist as he might have been had his talent failed him and had he lived on to become a man of settled habits in his native city." Also TINDALL, William York. **A Reader's Guide to James Joyce**. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1995, p. 6, where Tindall says, "the principal portrait of Joyce as moribund Dubliner is Gabriel Conroy of *The Dead*".

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