

## Gretta Conroy: The Dead Woman/The Dead One?

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It may prove to be somewhat simplistic and ingenuous to establish a starting point, such as the one offered here, which may be considered excessively clear-cut in the case of the analysis that follows. Yet, the premises upon which it is established, we would suggest, bring to the fore in a fundamental way the method by which James Joyce's works are composed and created.

Firstly, the premise that form and content fit together so as to give rise to a meticulously unified whole, which in itself constitutes a kind of microcosm (let us recall what may be considered something basic, but which tends to be overlooked, a case in point being a chapter such as "Oxen of the Sun" in *Ulysses*, where the history and development of language has its parallel in the evolution and development of the human foetus). The second premise is concerned with the idea that the Irish author always deals with the same thematic and formal components in all his works, while constantly submitting them to sinuous transformations (wherein lies the protean character of the oeuvre) which amount to nothing more than the expansion, strained at times, of an unchanging way of conceiving the creative process. There is no doubt that, at times, we tend to forget the existence of something extremely simple hidden in the midst of the stifling deviousness of Joyce's forms.

In formal terms, this "something" is what Fritz Senn calls metastasis when analyzing, for example, the different metaphorical descriptions of a term such as "Chrysostomos" in "Telemachus" in *Ulysses*:

Derived from a verb, *methistanani* (to place in another way, change), it means "change, shift, removal, transformation," in particular as used in classical rhetoric, it means a rapid transition from one point of view to another.<sup>1</sup>

The critic in question reminds us of the semantic expansion or reverberation inherent in the use Joyce makes of words, which manifests itself in that fusion and confluence of meanings ad infinitum that mark the signs present in *Finnegans Wake*. Thus, if such a method of composition is applicable to signs, it may also have an equivalent, as far as content is concerned, in the characterization of protagonists, thereby keeping faith with the key to compositional method: the inextricable synthesis of form and content. In this way, for example, just as a sign possesses multiple signifieds, as a result of the infinitely different combinations and transformations wrought by the signifier, a character may be seen to be made up of thousands of characters at one and the same time. Characters also undergo a kind of mutual contamination through which, subject to multiple "translations and shifts," their individuality is lost. There are many examples of this phenomenon in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*: Bloom is Ulysses, Shakespeare, the author, a woman, Hamlet, and even Stephen

(keeping in mind the idea that extremes are destined to impinge upon one another) and, at the same time, Stephen is Hamlet, Telemachus, the author, etc. In this same sense, the metamorphic nature of Anna Livia, who embodies a huge number of women simultaneously, makes for an obvious example of what we are suggesting. Yet, this phenomenon, or device, is not exclusive to these two works.

Precedents for this way of conceiving character may be found in *Dubliners* and, in particular, in "The Dead." Also, one of the consequences of this kind of morphological synthesis, either among words, or among characters, and which emerges in a significant way, is what may be interpreted as the fusion of gender identities. This approach, then, allows for an interpretation involving the cancelling out of male and female gender-labels, in terms of both form and content. How has this contrivance come to be recognizable?

In the case of *Ulysses*, what we perceive as constituting a kind of "technique of usurpation" turns out to be the very mechanism of compositional method employed by the author, given that, as far as both theme and form are concerned, usurpation is intrinsic to that same method. Moreover, this same author, more than any other, constantly usurps the past in order to disguise his works with the trappings of modernity. What appears to be innovative and iconoclastic is only so at first sight. In this same way Joyce ironizes and pokes fun at his own condition as a supposedly modern and original artist. What seems to be clearly recognizable as one particular gender, becomes ambiguous and almost indefinible. However, it can be argued that these generalizations would not only be applicable to Joyce. Wherein lies Joyce's capacity for innovation, therefore? We would suggest that the author undertakes a kind of fuzzing of gender-identities as a way of coming to terms with, or as a projection of, the turmoil and transformations affecting male and female gender roles. Specific examples may be considered.

There are studies which explore Bloom as "the New Womanly Man."<sup>2</sup> As regards the "feminine" characterization of this protagonist, there exists another study which analyzes his maternal, ambiguous aspect.<sup>3</sup> In the case of "The Dead," this same aspect is focused upon in terms of Woman as the symbol of the unity that Gabriel Conroy cannot reach.<sup>4</sup>

Thus it is possible to confirm that this strategy which involves the influence of gender in the configuration of characters has already been dealt with by critics. However, from our point of view, sufficiently unequivocal conclusions have not been reached since this aspect of characterization usually tends to take second place, perhaps due to a need to assign labels to anything and everything. This is especially true of certain schools within criticism based on the conception of literature as an art which sets up divisions between men and women.

It is a well-known fact that Joyce was obsessed by the intimacies of the life of his wife Nora Barnacle prior to their marriage, while taking artistic advantage of her letters, confessions, conversations and stories so as to compose parts of his oeuvre. Although this might not be an exclusive method employed by the writer, it does occur, thus reminding us that even geniuses possess the common, vulgar trait of being human, even though certain schools of literary criticism may try to avoid paying heed to the autobiographical as an influential feature of creative method.

In this way, then, what we are trying to show is that what we have called the "technique of usurpation" was one of Joyce's concerns, to the extent that he himself ironizes and pokes fun at the supposed originality and uniqueness of the figure of the artist, while also underlining how his vision

of literature, and of the world, is really and truly universal: without sexist and gender-based limitations of any kind. Within his works, strategies may be observed which, in formal or thematic terms, imply opting for the elimination of gender by transforming the stereotyped appropriation of "the mythically female" (the female object) by the male subject into a desire for complete and universal conjunction. This process is akin almost to eastern or classical mysticism, a procedure which reaches its culminating point in *Finnegans Wake*, we would affirm. In this respect, we may recall how sexual ambiguity and the fusion of the human and the animal constitute the very essence of myth.

As a result of this unifying process a revolutionary form of creation is seen to emerge, set forth in subtle ways by James Joyce in his experiments with language and his way of characterizing the protagonists of his works: what we understand as the dissolution of male and female gender-identities with regard to both form and theme. Thus, taking our argument a stage further, what ceases to be meaningful regarding Joyce are the so-called "feminist," "modernist" schools of criticism, or any other which is also narrowly based, since, above all, they clearly contradict the all-encompassing, intercultural conception of both art and life which marks Joyce's oeuvre.

It may be argued that this aspect of Joyce's art already comes to light in an incipient way in "The Dead." In English, gender ambiguity is already a naturally composite feature of the blurring of the male and the female. As critics have already pointed out, with regard to Spanish for example, "The Dead" has been translated as "Los Muertos" ("The Dead [Ones]") and also as "El Muerto" ("The Dead [One]" or "Lo Muerto" ("The Dead" as the equivalent of "That Which Is Dead").<sup>5</sup> In this same sense, we would offer a further reading: "The Dead Woman" or even "The Dead Women." The need to query these will always be present since, as far as Joyce is concerned, any kind of affirmation always carries with it a high degree of risk. Nevertheless, an attempt will be made here to not only justify this latter reading, but also suggest an interpretative twist when trying to come to terms with this short story. From the outset, i.e. beginning with its title, Joyce sows the seeds of doubt in the reader given that all the possible readings mentioned are feasible. The title itself blurs gender-identities.

Without rejecting interpretations that have preceded the one we offer here, attention will be paid to the conceptualization of "The Dead" in terms of the creative process at work within the term "La Muerta," in Spanish, or "The Dead Woman." Despite being seemingly contradictory, we are concerned with that part of the creative process in so much as its being defined through the cancelling out of gender categories both in relation to form as well as content. Once more we are dealing with Joyce's fascination for what may be considered universal: that which is embraced by *all in all*. It would not be too daring to affirm that nothing can be pigeonholed as regards the creative capacity of Joyce: not even boundary between male and female can be established. Ambiguity is essential to his art. Taking off from classical and eastern mythologies, Joyce adapts and reworks any concept, thereby reinterpreting it, the result being the equivocalness and unification of gender categories. By way of example, the characters in *Finnegans Wake*, in the same way as its linguistic signs, are seen to undergo constant transformation, while possessing a huge number of referents.

"The Dead" has been chosen for discussion here precisely because its title points to a device used frequently in earlier works. Reference has already been made here to the androgynous ambiguity that marks Bloom's identity

in *Ulysses*, while Molly's monologue contains confessional references to the desire to be a man. On the other hand, none of this corresponds to a vindictory stance which carries with it claims of a sexist, feminist, chauvinist or gay kind. Nothing is further from the truth. Any kind of tendentious approach to Joyce is doomed since, to a certain extent at least, it is in this indeterminate mixing that the key to understanding Joyce may be found. This is what makes him simultaneously modern and classical.

This kind of process is already present in an incipient form in "The Dead." It might be argued that at some point during the process of its creation the title may enclose a reference to Gretta Conroy, a suggestion which does not close off the rest of the female characters in the story (the title may also allude to the author himself, in terms of the destructive and sterile nature of, paradoxically speaking, the creative act).

At the same time, the title includes the idea of the male, the female and also the interaction of both genders. Traditional interpretations, oversimplifying the story thematically perhaps, indicate that Gabriel Conroy is a kind of victim whose existence is undermined by his wife's revelation of part of her past which casts a shadow of doubt upon the relevance of her husband's past, present and future. However, the story casts doubt upon the authenticity of both their lives. This is a perfectly valid approach. The "Dead" consists of a resurrected protagonist (Michael Furey), Gabriel as a member of the funeral cortège, metaphorically speaking, together with all the grey, provincial Dubliners present at the dinner, as well as all the has-beens that are recalled. Yet, what about Gretta Conroy?

It is our intention concentrate on the character of Gretta and its repercussions within the story. From our point of view Gretta Conroy is transformed into "The Dead" since Gabriel Conroy encroaches upon, absorbs the past of his wife's secret history, just as Bloom does, or Joyce, or as words do with one another. Yet she, like Anna Livia and Molly, is also life-source and originatory principle for Gabriel. He takes over "female" identity, and its world, as a way of assuring his own survival. May not this be a metaphor for the author's own creative process? What else do words actually do in *Finnegans Wake* except take each other over? However, despite this mutual hounding between gender identities, if such a term may be used, in the end what remains in our memory as a result of readings and the accumulation of images is, as may be exemplified by reference to the world of Art, the shattered figure of the ambiguous face of a somewhat mannish pseudo-woman, as in the case of the portraits of women by Picasso, together with the endless, diaphanous, reconciliatory presence of Molly's "Yes." Or, in this same sense, the presence of Anna Livia as the point of convergence for all that occurs in *Finnegans Wake*. In the end what remains is Woman as life principle, almost a kind of goddess such as Shiva, who envelops and embraces everything, wherein Man and Woman come together in equilibrium and harmony without any difference based on sex.

Gabriel Conroy, as in the case of Bloom with regard to Molly, or of Earwicker to Anna Livia, feeds off Gretta, off her essentialism, in order to establish his own identity. Nevertheless, at the same time, this process of nullification is accompanied by the emergence of a new identity as far as the characters are concerned, one which is neither male nor female: it simply involves an awareness of self. What truly fascinates us in the case of "The Dead" is the revelation of this story, Gretta's confession which almost has the same function as the so-called interior monologue of Molly in *Ulysses*. Gretta's story is the turning-point which undermines the validity of everything recounted by the narrator concerning the characters up until

then. If her history is kept in mind, as far as we can see, Gretta comes to be "The Dead" since she lives and moves within the frightening world of silence and death, yet only externally. This is because, probably, her most basic characteristic is her rebelliousness, which is what saves her to a certain extent from the apathy, paralysis and inner death that pervades the rest of the characters. This rebelliousness remains subtly hidden, beneath the false world of appearances which demands the maintenance of stereotypes of correctness regarding the character of the female, as also occurs in the case of Molly. Neither of these women turns out to be conventional. Gabriel Conroy's mother's refusal to accept the marriage is relevant in this regard:

A shadow passed over his face as he remembered her sullen opposition to his marriage. Some slighting phrases she had used still rankled in his memory; she had once spoken of Gretta as being country cute and that was not true of Gretta at all. (*D* 169)

Is the narrator not being ironical here? There is always something which eludes Gabriel, something which disturbs him concerning Gretta's apparently conventional nature. This latent rebelliousness in Gretta also finds its equivalent in Lily, the maid who, at first sight, seems to be a slave to men: "It was well for her she had not to attend to the ladies also" (*D* 160). Like Gretta, the maid conforms to the external, superficial prototype that is expected of her. However, beneath this apparent resignation and obsequiousness, the same facet of rebelliousness which marks the character of Gretta becomes discernible. In terms of stereotypes, this rebelliousness would be regarded as a somewhat masculine phenomenon. This is where we observe, then, a subtle merging of gender-related features in the case of characters apparently conventional and "dead" in their patterns of behaviour. There is life latently present beneath this apparent paralysis.

Our view is that what gives rise to this process of change, this transformation in the nature of character relationships is the presence of question-asking as a catalyst that affects their norm-orientated identity. That apparent condition of death that pervades the existence of all those that appear in Joyce's story is ruptured by the presence of questions. The apparent stability of Gabriel's stereotyped world is undermined by the asking of questions which obtain replies on the part of the women characters thus making him analyze the meaning of his life from a new perspective. This occurs, for example, in the case of the maid when he opens a dialogue with her while trying to wrest her identity and her freedom from her, receiving a gesture of rebelliousness as reply: "The men that now is only palaver and what they can get out of you. Gabriel coloured as if he had made a mistake" (*D* 162). What he expects from Gretta and Lily is silence. Yet, these women answer him aggressively. At the same time, they have taken over the supposed stereotype of the vociferous male with the aim of protecting and validating their inner existence. Breaking this silence implies transgressing gender roles, something which will give rise to modifications in the deadening superficiality to which Dublin's inhabitants cling. It may be recalled that the aunts also demand this same physical silence in Lily: "But the only thing they would not stand was back answers" (*D* 161). This mysterious, ineffable sphere of Lily's silent world of rebelliousness constitutes a threat to "Those Who Are Dead" since what they most fear is any kind of change that may cause to totter that past to which they cling, as occurs in the case of Aunt Kate: "There's that Lily, I'm sure I don't know what has come over her lately. She's not the girl she was at all" (*D* 165).

Similarly Gabriel is on the point of making the same mistake: asking

questions is the equivalent of meddling, or of usurpation: "Gabriel was about to ask his aunt some questions on this point but she broke off suddenly" (D 165). Questions are the threatening in-road which opens up the way to possible change. Yet, in the case of Lily, we are unaware of the nature and origin of this threatening tendency for change. As in the case of Gretta, to a certain extent Gabriel also aims to usurp the mystery of Lily: the explicit verbalizing of her inner world would imply the handing over of the maid's freedom.

As far as these women are concerned, silence is synonymous with inner freedom and a life of their own and not the imposition of external male authority, as traditional interpretations wish to make us accept. Neither is it a way of protecting their public image which they might project in accordance with what social convention expects of them. Upon recounting her past history with Michael, Gretta forfeits her freedom. Another example of how this concept of inner freedom may be seen as life-source is found in Molly Bloom's interior monologue which precisely evolves in silence since it implies the essence of the human condition: the right to preserve an inner world, not based on the factor of gender, and non-verbal also, which belongs exclusively to oneself. Traditionally women's verbal silence is interpreted as repression exerted from the outside which impinges upon their liberty or which is taken as a way of covering up sins. Relevant in this regard is the silence of the adulterous woman in *The Scarlet Letter*. In the case of Hester, by not revealing the name of her lover, it is precisely what that love means for her that is able to preserve. It has nothing to do with maintaining a public image and, for that reason, she puts up with the humiliation of wearing the letter. To a certain extent Gretta has done likewise over the years.

From the outset of the story there exists, then, a suppressed rebelliousness within those dead spaces, filled with silence, belonging to the characters' lives, and of which we know nothing, the resulting effect being one of high tension in the story. In the case of the Conroys, for example, doubts and conjectures arise. To a certain extent they do not adhere to the norm, although they may appear to do so at first sight, which is what again ruffles the apparent calm that marks the life and routine of these characters: "after ten o'clock and yet there was no sign of Gabriel and his wife" (D 167); "they wondered what could be keeping Gabriel" (D 167). The answer is also a mystery. What is Gretta's life like exactly?

Part of that answer is found in the way in which this character is presented to us. When Lily opens the door, Gretta does not return her greeting. It is Gabriel who answers: it is he who offers verbal contributions in different situations, even in the case of the ritual of greeting. Gretta seems to be a ghost, a figure, while it is by means of images of death that she is described in an ironic way by Gabriel, conforming once more to stereotype: "but they forget that my wife here takes three mortal hours to dress herself" (D 161). We will never discover whether this is the reason for their late arrival. There is no doubt that we are faced with omissions and it is in them that the agony and death of a character like Gretta lie. However, this mortal paralysis that affects her is only apparent externally. There is an effervescent life bubbling within her as will emerge when her history is revealed, although slightly modified and transformed through the workings of the imagination. In association with Gretta images related to cold and death are recurrent from the outset: "Kate and Julia said she must be perished alive" (D 161). The phrase "perished alive" condenses the idea of extremes that come into contact: Gretta is both dead and alive at the same time. Joyce

holds off on the voice of Gretta in direct speech thereby increasing this effect of remoteness and of a presence from beyond the grave that surrounds her as a character. Moreover, the references made by the aunts in their description of Gretta, prefigure Michael Furey's death due to the cold. Thus, both characters constitute a unity.

The silence in which Gretta's arrival is enclosed contrasts with her future outburst of words. Gabriel, almost hidden, is the one who replies to the ritual greetings "from the dark" (D 161). It is noteworthy that Gretta is a character whose descriptions always have the world of the senses as their referent. On first appearing she is presented through the opposite poles of silence and sound. The image comes to mind of Gretta, upon her arrival, "laughing" (D 161) while ascending the stairs with her aunts. The first reference to her as a character is related to the sense of hearing. From the outset things seem to be one way, but then they are found to be different. For example, at first the characters' laughter is charged with silence since it is a mere procedure that confirms metaphoric deathliness: "She [Gretta] broke out into a peal of laughter" (D 164) and "Gabriel laughed nervously" (D 164) and "Gretta thinks it is very funny because she says the word [goloshes] reminds her of Christy Minstrels" (D 164).

Laughter is the formal code that protects them from inner reality. They behave in the way that is expected of them. It is precisely all the paraphernalia surrounding the greetings, the toing and froing at dinner, the trivial conversations, the music, the suggestive sounds such as "listening to the skirts that swept against it" (D 163), which give emphasis to the isolation, the silence and the solitude in which Gretta is enveloped. We wonder what she is doing all this time with the aunts, what she is feeling, what she is saying. This textual omission, with regard to the inner world of Gretta at the beginning of the party, which the reader is obliged to fill in, reinforces her final verbal outpouring. At this stage of the story, Gretta, apparently "dead" in her silence is, on the contrary, found to be full of life even: full of zones and past episodes which belong only to her, set against the noisy emptiness that surrounds the rest of the characters. However, it may be said that her presence at the beginning of the story demands a certain degree of formal discretion so that her future intervention has greater impact. The wealth of sensual images related to the senses, such as hearing (Mary Jane's music and the aunt's song), sight (the descriptions of the party scene), taste (the references to food), speech (the allusions to opera singers), will be reduced to silence once Gretta listens to the "Lass of Aughrim" and reveals part of her past in the quiet of a depersonalized bedroom.

We would conclude that, as in *Ulysses*, and in "Proteus" in particular, there exists a reference to the way in which the senses tend to blur our apprehension of reality. It is striking that Gabriel is taken aback by an image of Gretta which reaches him via his senses which can distort reality: "If he were a painter he would paint her in that attitude" (D 188). At the same time Gretta gives herself up to and interprets the memories of the past under the unsettling influence of the music, of a song in fact. The senses, as in *Ulysses*, give rise to an almost hallucinatory, dreamy effect which casts doubt upon the reliability and veracity of the reality and the events that are narrated. It is in this sense that Gretta is felt to live as though dead, as though she were a ghost, just like Michael, somewhere on the border between dream and reality. Thus once again a thematic precedent for *Finnegans Wake* is found in *Dubliners*.

In contrast to the lack of verbal discourse in direct speech on the part of

Gretta, we come upon Gabriel already upset from the outset by the disturbing effect of words. The reply he receives from Lily, the maid, condemning men foreshadows part of the disappointment that he will later suffer at the hands of his wife: "the girl's bitter and sudden retort" (D 163). The replies undermine and threaten what is tangible, certain, preconceived and stereotyped regarding the provincial society of Dublin. The shortcomings of verbal language for the purpose of true communication is echoed in the apparently superficial conversation with the maid: "He would fail with them just as he had failed with the girl" (D 163). Talk is almost synonymous with error and error is one of the factors that contributes to the unfolding of the tragedy: "His whole speech was a mistake" (D 163). At the beginning of the story, Gabriel stands as a kind of counterpart to Gretta. He speaks and she remains silent. By the end the roles are reversed. That same transformation, that same blending mentioned earlier occurs. Gabriel, whose mistakes have consequences for her, becomes Gretta's other self almost: "Don't you remember, Aunt Kate, what a cold she got out of it?" (D 163) and "Gretta caught a dreadful cold" (D 163). Here once more the prior event of Michael Furey's death is what unites the three of them through the image of cold. Always implicit in these descriptions of Gretta is the same image of Michael Furey's death due to the cold. This again recalls the blurring of gender-identities and the complete unification of the male and female characters: "She'd walk home in the snow if she were let" (D 164), just as Michael did. And it is in that phrase "if she were let" where we find part of that rebellious, uneasy, lively behaviour of the Gretta suffocated by the paternalistic, overprotective attitude of Gabriel. The snow seems to be the equivalent of freedom and not, as critics would have us believe at times, of death.

Gretta Conroy's reaction to her husband's previous comment is again described by means of the absence of verbal reply on her part. Once again Gretta covers up her inner world, her inner silence, with sound, with the sound of laughter in fact, laughter which probably reverberates with echoes of her past in Galway. The relationship between the Conroys reminds us of the husband's relationship with his wife in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*: one based on pampering and acquiescence. Gretta appears to assimilate the paternalistic game of husbandly caring. She has to wear "goloshes" to protect her legs (as though she were a kind of mute mermaid), thereby complying with her husband's wishes, while also keeping up with fashions on the Continent: "O, but you'll never guess what he makes me wear now!" (D 164). Nevertheless, we detect in these apparently inoffensive, trivial and acquiescent replies that there exists a certain degree of implicit rebelliousness as far as Gretta is concerned, so that she is far from being the kind of dead, conventional character that the others turn out to be. Her reply, "The next thing he'll buy me will be a diving suit" (D 164), to a certain extent makes Gabriel look ridiculous, reinforcing thereby the narrator's irony which offers us the artificial, angelical vision which the former has of his wife, in keeping with gender stereotyping: "She seemed to him so frail that he longed to defend her against something" (D 191).

This sugary view of things contrasts with Gretta's subtle inner defiance which, to a certain extent, breaks with the stereotyped behaviour of a woman of that time, while the author opts for the interaction or fusion of gender roles. As in the case of Molly Bloom, for example, in terms of family life Gretta is not a stereotyped mother as corresponds to the narrator's descriptions. It is possible to see that Gabriel also acts as mother, thus breaking with traditional gender roles, just as Bloom was in his fantasies as reflected in "Circe":



He's really an awful bother, what with green shades for Tom's eyes at night and making him do the dumb-bells, and forcing Eva to eat the stirabout. The poor child. (D 164)

Thus, beneath the death-inducing, inoffensive life of Gretta there exists a wish to demolish the stereotypes of a society paralyzed by the past and its conventions. There is a certain degree of nonchalance, unconcern and a desire for freedom in Gretta's replies which echo Molly Bloom's brazenness: "And the children, Gretta, you're not anxious about them? —O, for one night, said Mrs Conroy. Besides, Bessie will look after them!" (D 165). Little by little, we discover in Gretta a kind of nonconformism which carries her toward that lost identity of hers which, so it seems, is not accepted by Gabriel: "I'd love to see Galway again" (D 173). Gabriel's reply, "You can go if you like" (D 173), constitutes a rejection of his wife's primal world. The West is both the past and the present at the same time. Gabriel chooses, rather, and desires that which he has at hand (Europe) and yet does not possess, that which is still to come, that which is not here and now. All this adding up to a wish to escape his own reality. Thus the desire to go out for a walk in the snow instead of having to give a speech: "How much more pleasant it would be there than at the supper table" (D 173); or to practise foreign languages instead of his own (a perfunctory fashionable stance).

When all is said and done Gabriel wishes to be someone he is not (he aspires to becoming a writer and he carries on this activity hiding behind the initials G. C., although he is found out by Molly Ivors). However, doubts are cast upon his genuineness with regard to this activity since he is found to be writing for the *Daily Express*. And, what is more important, he yearns for and is trapped by a false, distorted image of his wife. He prefers an idealized past rather than the palpable present since the latter demands that he changes. Therein lies the cause of his paralysis. He wrongly sees Gretta sublimated as if through a painting, thus transforming her into an abstraction: "Distant Music" (D 188). Gabriel clings to that which does not exist and that which does not exist is the equivalent of Death.

"The Dead" reflects upon our yearning for that which is beyond our scope, upon vagueness, emptiness and fallacy as far as our lives are concerned, upon everything that impedes our apprehension of what is really worthwhile: "No, it was not the moment yet" (D 195). It is a story about the zone of uncertainty where we all find ourselves: "People, perhaps, were standing in the snow on the quay outside, gazing up at the lighted windows and listening to the waltz" (D 182). It is that zone which threatens to undermine the harmony of existence, turning it into chaos. Gabriel senses the emptiness of his world. "The Dead" presents us with the superfluity of those useless conversations that weave through the relationships between characters, while what is essential is left out: that which we could do in the present, but do not: "He would call her softly" (D 192). All this may be summed up in how we let slip from us those shortlived moments of naturally spontaneous happiness in favour of a false, inexistent paradise: "He could have flung his arms about her hips" (D 193).

A case in point is found on the occasion when, returning to their hotel room, Gabriel has high hopes for the recovery of the intimacy with his wife. He extols the light that comes through the window and rejects the need of a candlestick since it is something as real, tangible and common as the present itself: "—We don't want any light. We have light enough from the street. And I say, he added, pointing to the candle, you might remove that handsome article, like a good man" (D 193). It is as if the characters in "The Dead" were always giving a theatrical performance. Gabriel wishes to

maintain the theatrical atmosphere thereby draining genuineness from that which he truly desires: "A ghostly light from the street lamp lay in a long shaft from one window to the door" (*D* 193). By wishing for the future or exalting the past through the imagination or by means of a fiction all the possibilities offered by the present are felt to slip away, especially since the present brings together genders, as well as the dead and the living. Gabriel's delay in seducing his wife is usually interpreted as an act of delicacy on his part: "No, it was not the moment yet" (*D* 195), or "To take her as she was would be brutal" (*D* 195).

What Gabriel perceives is the great distance that sets Gretta off from him, her absorption in herself as a free individual within her own world; he becomes aware that, in fact, she is alive. She is seen to be real and not as he would wish or hope her to be, conforming to the supposed solemnity and sense of adventure that marks the moment they are going through, given that they have freed themselves from routine for one day. The narrator ironizes the situation thus: "He [Gabriel] felt that they had escaped from their lives and duties, escaped from home and friends and run away together with wild and radiant hearts to a new adventure" (*D* 193). To accept Gretta in the present, which involves accepting a series of contradictions as well things unknown about her past, instead of filtering her through his imagination, means that Gabriel has to come to terms with himself. Probably this option terrifies him since it means a change in the pattern of their relationship, which also implies questioning the genuineness of his own feelings.

Gabriel has been making a mistake all along since he constantly deludes himself with regard to everything; he thinks himself superior to the rest: "that their grade of culture differed from his" (*D* 163). He is incapable of accepting his wife's freedom, confusing its signs: "Now that she had fallen to him" (*D* 196). On the other hand, he mistakenly overvalues and idealizes his environment: "A new generation is growing up" (*D* 196). Therein lies his tragedy. He misinterprets the most elemental and primal signals that his wife transmits to him in one form or another: "Perhaps her thoughts had been running with his" (*D* 196). He is incapable of fathoming Gretta's mystery, of accepting her silence. In that sense, when Gretta reveals directly what she has borne within her all along, she does so without beating about the bush: "Oh, I am thinking about that song, 'The Lass of Aughrim'" (*D* 196).

From this moment on Gretta dominates the story. Her own story also revolves around how imagination and fiction contribute to the patterning of reality. At no time does Gretta talk about her feelings. As far as she is concerned they may only be those of a friend. She briefly recounts what she thinks the events were, but perhaps it is she herself who endows the story with dramatic air: "I think he died for me" (*D* 198). Gretta creates what is almost a fictional piece of literature. Little does it matter whether it corresponds to the truth or not. Perhaps what has kept her going all along is the belief that something spectacular, dramatic and extraordinary took place in her past which gives meaning to her present. The image of Michael Furey under a tree throwing stones on a cold night reminds us in one way or other of the importance exerted unconsciously by literature itself (by fiction, by words) upon people's actions. The scene recalls Romeo and Juliet and thereby the unconscious evocation of the death of the adolescent lover. There is a reference which may be kept in mind: "A picture of the balcony scene in Romeo and Juliet hung there" (*D* 169). Gabriel contemplates it in his aunts' drawing room and to a certain extent it prefigures Gretta's story.

Really speaking, Gretta's confession may be considered as the surrender

of her most recondite self to Gabriel. Yet, the story, its details, its anecdotal value do not seem to interest her husband. What concerns him is how to adjust its content to his own needs and situation. At no time does Gretta talk about that relationship as one based on love: "and there was the poor fellow at the end of the garden shivering" (*D* 199). It is a mystery that belongs to her alone. Gabriel needs to take over Gretta's story in order to transmute and transform it, to adapt the terms in which that relationship evolved to a code of his own so as to justify in some form or other his own spiritual death and failure in love.

Gretta's pain upon recalling the details of the story does not concern him. He is only interested in whether the events reached a point of consummation or not, something to which Gretta offers no reply:

- Someone you were in love with? he asked ironically.
- It was a young boy I used to know. . . .
- Well; and then? asked Gabriel. (*D* 197)

From this moment on, Gabriel sets forth upon his own interpretation of the simple, unclear, probably confused details due to the way in which time has played tricks with his wife's memory. Gretta's anecdote fades into the background, Gabriel absorbs it and adapts it in order to help him configure his own identity using what she has told him as his point of departure. Doubts and conflicts arise in him, while he also puts Gretta's story into words. Thus, Gretta represents both the source and principle of life for Gabriel rather than the ending of an ordinary story. That concealed happening in Gretta's past allows Gabriel to face up to his life and we come to view him differently as a man. Gretta's story now gives meaning to the narrator's irony and Gabriel offers us his own interpretation of the story thereby relieving his pain and emptiness: "So she had had that romance in her life: a man had died for her sake" (*D* 199). It seems that they both need to believe this in order to be reborn. Yet, Gabriel absorbs the story, interprets it and makes use of it as a way of achieving his own freedom. Almost immediately, the whole of that supposedly great love and admiration felt for his wife is seen to vanish: everything was mere appearance. And now his feelings seem to be frozen: "He did not like to say even to himself that her face was no longer beautiful" (*D* 199). Yet, does Gretta's story, whether true or idealized, really matter to Gabriel? What Gabriel really has to face up to at this moment is the inevitability of death which reduces to nought all that is ephemeral and anecdotal, including love: "Yes, yes, that would happen very soon" (*D* 200). Anything else is simply insignificant and ridiculous. His interest is not even aroused any longer by Gretta extenuated in vacant emptiness through an image which recalls the sleeping Juliet in Shakespeare's tragedy. Perhaps, by means of dream, just like Molly thinking back on her past lovers at night, Gretta is reunited with the dead adolescent, thus recovering her freedom in some form or other: "She was fast asleep" (*D* 199).

With her story she has passed on to Gabriel her dreams, her frustrations and her fears, or, in other words, her female identity. Without realizing it, both of them have become fused the one with the other through the destruction of the past. At the same time, Gabriel has become fused with Michael Fury, as reflected in the ambiguous final He, as also occurs with the ambiguous hes in "Penelope." Are we to take as certain what the narrator tells us when he says, "He had never felt like that himself towards any woman but he knew that such a feeling must be love" (*D* 200); or is this another instance of irony? Would it not be the case that he, just like Michael

and Gretta, has also lived by clinging to a version of reality, or of love, which, as far as he is concerned, is totally fictitious and invented, given that what is questioned here is the genuineness of his feelings toward Gretta? All along Gabriel has also been almost as unreal and fictitious as Michael Furey is for Gretta, and vice versa. It would seem that neither of the characters has ever faced up to the reality of their true feelings. Joyce reveals to us how, really speaking, individuals create for themselves a false identity with a mythic outline that transforms them into characters.

What indeed turns out to be important is the inevitability of death over and above this common, ordinary story and this is what Gabriel becomes aware of as he contemplates the snow in a moment of epiphanic revelation; he becomes aware of the only universal reality that blots out any kind of gender-based delimitations. Gretta, Gabriel, as well as Michael, cease to be of importance now: "but he knew that it was no longer the face for which Michael Furey had braved death" (*D* 199). So do the aunts: "What did he care that his aunts were only two ignorant old women?" (*D* 174). Through her ghost story Gretta has provided her husband with the necessary instrument with which he can face up to the burden of death which threatens and puts an end to us all. Yet, at the same time, Gretta has been a source of life and hope for Gabriel, just like Anna Livia, just like Molly, through her metaphoric resurrection of a dead man. By the end of the story, then, all the characters have been made equal and it is through death that they exist without the limitations imposed by gender-identity and yet, paradoxically, they also exist as part of the current of life.

#### Notes

1. Fritz Senn, *Joyce's Dislocations: Essays on Reading as Translation*, ed. John Paul Riquelme (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1984) 139.

2. See, for instance, Joseph Allen Bloone, "A New Approach to Bloom as 'Womanly Man': The Mixed Middling's Progress in *Ulysses*," *James Joyce Quarterly* 20 (1982): 67-85.

3. See, for instance, J. Bormanis, "'In the First Bloom of Her New Motherhood': The Appropriation of the Maternal and the Representation of Mothering in *Ulysses*," *James Joyce Quarterly* 29.3 (1992): 593-606.

4. See, for instance, Leonard Garry, "Joyce and Lacan: The Woman as Symbol of Masculinity in 'The Dead,'" *James Joyce Quarterly* 28.2 (1991): 451-72.

5. Professor Francisco García Tortosa suggested these possibilities in a lecture given as part of the VII Encuentros James Joyce held at the Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha in Almagro, 21-22 April, 1995.