

## Apotheosis, Metaphor, and Death: John Huston's *The Dead* Again

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Much has been written about the parallels between 20th-century cinematography and James Joyce's narrative techniques.<sup>1</sup> Because the birth of cinema, the emergence of Modernism, and the development of Joyce's art coincide, the analyses of mutual interdependencies and influences invite themselves quite naturally. There are, of course, unbridgeable differences between cinematic and textual representations and, using John Huston's adaptation of Joyce's "The Dead" as an example, I will attempt to isolate some of the aspects of Joyce's story that are particularly unrenderable on screen. At least two emerge right away: one has to do with casting and the other with Gabriel's epiphany. I will use these two aspects as I attempt to resolve the dilemma why for me, a Joycean, the viewing of Huston's *The Dead* causes a split of sensibilities, renders "two thinks at a time," whereby as much as I like Huston's film, I do not consider it "Joyce" at all.

Adaptations of literary works to the screen have a special status among the modes of signification. They are, by definition, preceded by a text and governed by narrative codes that are meta-textual. For that reason, I have always preferred to watch a film adaptation of a given literary work after reading that work because it has always been important for me to create my own "mental picture" of what the literary characters and places are like, which usually allowed me to appreciate better a director's rendition of them on screen. We all have our own "visualizations" of literary works and seldom do they coincide with those of film directors'. We raise critical questions about faithfulness of a film to a given text, about the autonomy of a film medium *vis-à-vis* literature, or about the director's interpretation of a literary work of art, to mention just a few.

The response of Joyceans to Huston's *The Dead* is a very particular case in point, especially because of the degree of our familiarity with Joyce's text. Some of us may admire Huston's adaptation for its faithfulness to the time period (lighting, costumes, music, diction), or criticize it for the lack of faithfulness to Joyce's text (questionable additions and equally questionable deletions), or to Dublin's geography (many Joyceans had heard Fritz Senn point out repeatedly that Gabriel's carriage leaves the party in the direction of Phoenix Park, not the Gresham Hotel). Most of these points have already been addressed in Joycean and film criticism,<sup>2</sup> and whereas I would like to add to those discussions, I would also like to point out a purely cinematic aspect of Huston's adaptation which, as it took away "the Joyce" (at least for me), it added to my appreciation of the film and brought back some long-forgotten interpretive dimensions that I shall present here.

John Huston's translation of Joyce's textual vision into a cinematic vision departs from the following premise of Joyce's: it will take the readers by surprise to discover Gretta Conroy's function in the story. That is, the first-time readers of Joyce's "The Dead," while waiting along with the aunts for

Gabriel to arrive at the party (and for someone to “drop dead,” as my students inform me), will devote their attention mainly to Gabriel when he is finally there; the fact that Gabriel arrives with his wife will be, at least initially, quite secondary. The textual Gretta, referred to as Gabriel’s “wife” five times before her given name is mentioned, is easily overlooked throughout most of the story, and, because of her rather peripheral role during the dinner party, it is quite a momentous discovery to realize the centrality of her character to the whole story, a kind of readerly epiphany certainly not unplanned by Joyce. In contrast, the first-time viewers of Huston’s *The Dead* (as my on-going classroom experience indicates), upon seeing Anjelica Huston on screen, will immediately recognize the importance of the character she plays: hers will have to be a central role and, from that perspective (until the “staircase” and the Gresham Hotel scenes), hers will be a somewhat disappointing role, too. But the audience will stay with her character, ready for some breakthrough, some justification for casting a star of Anjelica Huston’s status in Gretta’s role.

In this respect, the film medium, determined by the actors and the degree of their stardom, is from the outset “condemned” to give away those kinds of narrative subtleties and strategies that the literary medium can cleverly conceal until the end. And whereas, as a Joycean who knows the story (and as a film-buff) I adore Anjelica Huston as Gretta, as a Joycean who teaches the story (and as a critic), I see a flaw in casting any star actress in Gretta’s role.

This brings me to my next point, the “staircase scene.” Michael O’Shea has written about it in 1990,<sup>3</sup> and, at the 1991 University of Miami conference on “Joyce and Popular Culture,” he and his panelists analyzed the “staircase scene” both in Joyce and in Huston. Their presentations highlighted the fact that in Huston, instead of seeing first “a woman” and only later recognizing her as “his wife,” Gabriel can never possibly doubt who the “woman” at the top of the stairs is: Huston has Gretta almost face Gabriel (and the audience): she is fully lit and magnificently double-framed, first, by the bluish-greenish hues of stained-glass window and second, by the white shawl draped around her face and shoulders, the colors and their halo-like effect partaking in the symbology of the Virgin Mary and of Ireland. Every time I watch this scene, my sensibilities bifurcate: aesthetically, I admire this cinematic gem of a scene (as I appreciate Huston’s apotheosis of his daughter), but at the same time, I realize that this is *not* Joyce. Huston’s representation of Gretta participates in well-established (and, by now, well-recognized and criticized) economies of scopophilic objectification of women on screen. Two decades ago Laura Mulvey observed that in the process of film-making,

[t]he determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously *looked at* and *displayed*, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact. . . .<sup>4</sup>

Mulvey adds that the figure of woman is a leitmotif of erotic spectacle and that woman’s visual presence on screen “tends to work against the development of a story-line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation” (Mulvey 426). Huston’s shot of Gretta while she listens to D’Arcy’s song lasts over two minutes (there are four one- or two-second recourses to Gabriel)—more that plenty of time for an “erotic contemplation” of Gretta on the part of both Gabriel and film-viewers. As a result, “the sexual impact of the performing woman takes the film into a

no man's land outside its own time and space" (Mulvey 426), something that does not happen in Joyce's text.

In Joyce, Gabriel's momentary non-recognition of "a woman" at the top of the staircase is crucial, first, to Gabriel's eventual epiphanic revelation, and second, to the text's own epiphanic aporia. As Gretta ("a woman" full of "grace and mystery," *D* 210), is metonymically transformed by Gabriel into "terracota and salmonpink" skirt panels made appear black and white by the shadow (*D* 209), and then symbolically fixed as a painting called "Distant Music," she becomes a text and a review Gabriel is "writing," now that his mind is free from composing the dinner speech. The series of rhetorical reductions that produce "Distant Music" also produce arousal in Gabriel, as was the case when he was engaging in his previous rhetorical preoccupation, his dinner speech. We remember Gabriel's pre-dinner desire to *get back at* Miss Ivors (prompted by a mental picture of her projected satisfaction should he fail in his dinner speech; *D* 192). It is now replaced by his post-dinner desire to *get back with* his wife (prompted by a few erotic memories of their life together, which send "through him a keen pang of lust," *D* 215). The complex economies of textuality/sexuality/production present here will, of course, be further problematized in all of Joyce's works.

To the extent that "the Text is experienced only in an activity of production," as Roland Barthes puts it,<sup>5</sup> Gabriel's capacity for experiencing the world around him appears to be bound by rhetoricity, that is, by his text-producing impulses that codify his responses to people in general, and to women in particular. One notes the narrowness of his experience of the dinner party limited to carving and to what he "writes *in*" to the speech, as he writes *off* (carves out) everything else (Lily; dancing; Freddy; the dinner conversation). Thus, when his pre-written script for a marital night at the Gresham Hotel falls flat in the presence of Gretta's story about Michael Furey (the "activity of production" of the text being thus taken away from Gabriel, rendering his experience of it impossible), he finds himself not only defeated by his own "rhetoricizing" tendencies ("humiliated by the failure of his irony," *D* 219) but also reduced to a series of figures of speech: a ludicrous "pennyboy for his aunts," a "nervous well-meaning sentimentalist, orating to vulgarians and idealizing his own clownish lust,"<sup>7</sup> a "pitiable fatuous fellow" (*D* 220).

In this light, Joyce's textual rendition of Gabriel's thoughts at the closing of the story produces a lacuna between what the text means to say and what it is, in effect, constrained to mean. Gabriel's self-consciousness, so apparent throughout the dinner party, does not seem to leave him even when Gretta is asleep. Joyce has Gabriel enveloped in darkness and solitude which should, one would think, foster letting go of guard and relinquishing the pose and self-preoccupation. And yet, while looking at Gretta's sleeping face, Gabriel begins to "write" another text about her and about himself. Thinking about Gretta's past "girlish beauty," he is overcome by "a strange friendly pity" (*D* 222). Friendly? "He did not like to say even to himself that her face was no longer beautiful. . ." (*D* 222). Even to himself? Who is Gabriel speaking to? Whose presence is he so painfully aware of? If by his own admission Gretta's beauty is the thing of the past, his desire for her can, indeed, be rekindled only rhetorically. But his desire gone now, he speculates that "[p]erhaps she had not told him the whole story" (*D* 222). He stops short, however, of speculating what that story might be, a puzzling choice for an otherwise keen text-producer. To me, Gabriel's elliptic "perhaps" flags a series of other "perhapses": perhaps Gretta had found herself pregnant ("I was great with him at that time," *D* 220) after all those

walks with Michael Furey. Later, in the winter, when it began to show, perhaps she was whisked away from her young lover to the convent where she could secretly give birth to a child; perhaps the child was miscarried or stillborn given the mother's grief when she had learned about her lover's death: why else would "The Lass of Aughrim" ("... the air with words expressing grief . . . 'My babe lies cold' . . ." *D* 210) cause such a crisis in Gretta? Too young to mourn then, she may now be experiencing a rather profound realization of the enormity of what had happened to her years ago—an epiphany remarkably overlooked by the Joyce scholarship. The title of the story, thus, could denote, along with all the dead of Gabriel's epiphany, the two particular dead: Gretta's unborn/stillborn child and the child's father, Michael Furey.<sup>6</sup>

Gabriel's ellipsis marks, in my view, his vague recognition of Gretta as a flesh-and-blood *woman* (as opposed to "wife") who has a past and, "perhaps," a story to tell about it. Emerging as a woman for the second time that evening—and in a much more profound sense than just a "pre"-text, a muse, for his creation "Distant Music"—Gretta does not generate any text in Gabriel this time. As his attention diverts to her clothes, now thrown about the room, we are reminded once again about Gabriel's equation of "woman" with "panel skirts." In the staircase scene, his initial "blindness" parallels his deafness: recognizing that it is Gretta who is listening to something, Gabriel "strained his ear to listen also. But he could hear little save the noise of laughter and dispute on the front steps, a few chords struck on the piano and a few notes of a man's voice singing" (*D* 209). It is then that he conceives his "painting": a blind-deaf painter creating "Distant Music." A euphemism for what he can neither hear nor see, his "Distant Music" amounts to a final step in rhetorical reduction and distancing of Gretta-as-woman, whereby even the metonymic traces of her person are gone: while "painting" a picture about the music he cannot hear, he obliterates Gretta even from the title of his painting and, thus, she disappears, distanced by—and abstracted into—language/rhetoric.

Edgar Allan Poe's "The Oval Portrait," tells a story of a painter so wrapped up in capturing his new bride-model on canvas that at the very moment of rendering her essence, her life in painting, he finds his actual model dead. Prompted by Poe's story, Hélène Cixous notes the preoccupation of the turn-of-the-century artists with the ethical relation of the artist to his model—the creator to the created (31), expressed not only by Poe but also, among others, by Pirandello and Bernhard, all of whom wrote stories "of the person who gives life; it's the model who gives life whereas we think it's the painter. The painter is the one who takes the model's life. A metaphor for all the arts" (30).<sup>7</sup>

Even if Gabriel is not quite the artist that Cixous has in mind, there is an eerie parallel between the dynamics she describes and Gabriel's desire to paint "Distant Music" on the one hand, and his wish to "crush [Gretta's] body against his, to overmaster her" (*D* 217), to "take her life" on the other. After all, Gabriel "paints" a series of pictures of Gretta, that anticipate their time alone in Gresham Hotel when she will be undressing, ready for the amorous exchange he expects. When his anticipation becomes frustrated by Gretta's story, it is with horror that one realizes how narrowly she escapes "death" (rape) as Gabriel decides that "[t]o take her as she was would be brutal" (*D* 217).<sup>8</sup> Still, in the light of Gabriel's interrogation of Gretta about Michael Furey, I have always seen the Gresham Hotel scene in terms of Cixous' "painter-model" relationship, with Gabriel drawing life out of Gretta until she, tortured by recollections and exhausted by sobs, drifts to

sleep--metaphorical death. Gretta, the dead. There was a time when I actually thought that Gretta did die at the end of the story, a death to which Gabriel, thinking she is asleep, would be oblivious until morning ...

The memory of this long-forgotten reading came back to me in light of Huston's film and in light of Bret Harte's *Gabriel Conroy*. A sentence in Harte's novel describes Gabriel as a well-loved and "well-cushioned figure to whose charge babies were entrusted and *in whose arms many dead had died.*"<sup>9</sup> What is striking about this sentence is that, unlike Joyce, Huston has Gabriel *hold* Gretta in his arms before she falls on the bed sobbing during the Gresham Hotel scene. This inter-textual correspondence between Harte's and Huston's Gabriels parallels another one: "So, did Gretta die?" asked some of my students who watch the film before they read the story. I am always interested why they reach this conclusion. "Because why would she be played by Anjelica Huston?" they explain. Anjelica Huston playing the dead. John Huston dying making *The Dead*. Cixous reading death as a metaphor for all the arts.

The subtleties of the filmic Gretta's recollection of Michael Furey can easily be lost on the viewing audience, as is Gabriel's anticipation of his intimacy with Gretta in Gresham Hotel. The resulting "riots of emotion" which make Gabriel's epiphanic moment so poignant in the story, are resolved differently by Huston. His solution is strictly cinematic. It proceeds from what Teresa de Laurentis describes as the "codes which constitute the specificity of cinema as a semiotic practice . . ." (138), and which rely on "the centrality of the system of the look in cinematic representation" (138).<sup>10</sup> Already in the staircase scene Huston structures a vision of Gabriel/Gretta relationship in a series of intersecting gazes (the audience gazes at Gabriel gaze at Gretta), but whether the looking arouses Gabriel remains undetermined: there is no voice-over to tell the audience what/how Gabriel feels. Since the viewing audience, trained in the codes of cinema, participates in the economies of the gaze, its meaning seems obvious: it encodes sexual desire of the male for the female. The viewers feel rewarded for their patience: at last the main star of the film gets to play her role as an object of her husband's desire. The audience's "pleasure" results from the reliance of the cinematic narration on the "apparatus of looks converging on the female figure," says de Laurentis. The following generic description of this effect by de Laurentis fits Huston's staircase scene like a glove:

The woman is framed by the look of the camera as icon, or object of the gaze: an image made to be looked at by the spectator, whose look is relayed by the look of the male character(s). The latter not only controls the events and narrative action but is "the bearer" of the look of the spectator. The male protagonist is thus "a figure in a landscape . . . free to command the stage . . . of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action."<sup>11</sup>

Thus in the film, the character of Gretta, framed by Gabriel's (and the audience's) gaze, is finally "articulated" by Gabriel's look—he, the bearer of spectators' look, will create "the action"—after all, they are going to the hotel. The cinematic code of sexual objectification directs the narrative differently than does Joyce's textual code which allows the reader to access Gabriel's thoughts. Unlike textual Gabriel, the cinematic one, on the way to the hotel, tells Gretta a horse story, then inquires about the song she listened to so intently. He comes through as an understanding spouse who, when his wife falls asleep after her painful recollection of a youthful love, reflects serenely on life and death. And so there is no room in the film for Gabriel's

“generous tears,” because, structurally, the cinematic narration did not build up to Gabriel’s epiphanic moment. In this respect, Huston-the artist, using Joyce-the model, has “drawn life” out of his model. And gave his own. A metaphor for all the arts.

#### Notes

1. John Huston’s *The Dead* premiered on December 11, 1987, in New York; see Richard Gerber’s review of the film in *JJQ* 25 (1988): 527-33. In December 1997 I presented this essay at the MLA Convention in Toronto, at the session arranged by the International James Joyce Foundation. It was my way of celebrating the film’s 10th anniversary and I would like to thank Zack Bowen, the Foundation’s President, for giving me that opportunity.

2. From Joycean perspective, some of the most pertinent critical analyses of Joyce’s story *vis-à-vis* Huston’s adaptation are: Lea Beachler’s and A. Walton Litz’s review in *JJQ* 25 (1988): 521-27; Richard Gerber’s review in *JJQ* 25 (1988): 527-33; and Michael O’Shea’s review “‘Raiders and Cinemen Too’: Joyce on Video,” *JJLS* 4 (1990): 21-23. Clive Hart (who at the onset of the filming project served as a consultant to John Huston and his son, Tony Huston, the author of screenplay) provides a set of useful comments from the insider’s point of view in his *Joyce, Huston and the Making of “The Dead”* (Colin Smythe, 1988).

3. See Michael O’Shea in note 2.

4. See Laura Mulvey’s essay “Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema” (emphasis added). I relied on the version reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, ed. Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer, 3rd ed. (New York: Longman, 1994) 425. Further references to this essay will be cited parenthetically in the text as Mulvey.

5. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975) 157.

6. Ruth Bauerle in her groundbreaking essay, “Date Rape, Mate Rape: A Liturgical Interpretation of ‘The Dead,’” *New Alliances in Joyce Studies*, ed. Bonnie Kime Scott (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1988), acknowledges that scholars “have long recognized that the ballad of ‘The Lass of Aughrim’ depicts betrayal” (114). It certainly does, but, as my reading suggests, the song, in the context of Gretta’s reaction to it, might encode much more than that. Gretta’s unproportionately exulted response to the song (and, metonymically, to the evening’s events and outcome) amounts to a much more profound epiphany than Gabriel’s. Of course, for Gretta, “The Lass of Aughrim” represents (metonymically again) Michael Furey, not only because he used to sing that song, but also because its lyrics mention the “tokens” that passed between the lovers (for Michael and Gretta, in my reading, they would be not rings or smocks, but a potential pregnancy and a loss of a child, whether aborted, miscarried or stillborn).

7. Hélène Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* (New York: Columbia UP, 1993) 30.

8. See also Bauerle 118.

9. Bret Harte, *Gabriel Conroy: Bohemian Papers: Stories of and for the Young*, 2 vols. (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1903) 1: 22-23 (emphasis added).

10. Stephen Heath, in his *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1981) notes the importance of “the look” and states that “cinema turns on a series of ‘looks’ which join, cross through and relay one another . . . It is this series of looks which provides the framework . . . for a pattern of multiply relaying identifications” (119-20). Teresa de Laurentis, in *Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984) elaborates—after Laura Mulvey—that it is “‘the place of the look that defines cinema’ . . . and governs its representation of woman” (138) and integrates “voyeurism into the conventions of storytelling, [thus combining] visual and narrative pleasure” (138-39).

11. De Laurentis 139; see note 10.