

The Symbol of Death in *The Dead* of James Joyce

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Abstract

The Dead is the last article in *Dubliners*, and the structure of *Dubliners* reflects the shadow of paralysis, which covers all stages of life in Ireland, severely destroying the hearts of all ages. *The Dead* described a simple story that Gabriel, a sensitive, humorous, educated senior intellectual, and his wife attended a party at his aunts' house. His spirit was hit twice by Lily and Ivors at the party. And his mental was hit for the third time when he wanted to have sex with his wife after the party, and the last blow made him have the epiphany related to life and death. *The Dead* is the summary of the previous novels, which manifested the symbol of death heavily and deeply. This paper focus on the analysis of five aspects of the symbol of death in *The Dead* to reveal the death philosophy of Joyce, including names and destiny of characters, some details at the party, disappearance of Irish culture and the "snow".

Keywords

The Dead, symbol, Joyce, death, Irish culture

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1. Introduction

Dubliners consists of fifteen stories, which reflects the different aspects of life in Dublin. It can be roughly divided into four stages of a person's life: childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and social life. The paralysis of Dubliners' spiritual life was described by Joyce in a realistic way. The death of Father Flynn in *The Sisters* announces the focus on death in later stories like *The Dead*. By designing such circularity, Joyce alluded that the best people are dead while the living are mentally dead in Dublin. The cycle also points to the repeating and unchanging earthly life of Dubliners. In *The Dead*, the indifference, disappointment, and numbness of Dublin towards the future are revealed through the unchanging Christmas party and the events in gathering.

The background of *The Dead* is the story between Nora and Bodkin in 1903, the man who pursued her in Galway.

Hewas unfortunately contracted with tuberculosis and saw Nora off with a song singing by him on a rainy day when Nora left for Dublin. Soon, Nora learned of his death in Dublin, and has always felt guilty and compassionate to him ever since. Joyce was jealous of his wife's inner feelings for her deceased lover. And inspired by Thomas More's song "Ah! The Dead", he got the urge to create *The Dead*. He turned himself into Gabriel in the novel and recorded his feeling in his love experience. A sense of disillusionment was manifested through Gabriel's psychological changes (Xu, 2019).

2. The Symbol of Death in *The Dead*

According to the Bible, the narrow door leads to eternal life, and the wide door leads to death. Death is the ultimate manifestation of loneliness that human will never be able to bypass this hurdle. There is no one could live forever, but everyone know nothing about the world after death. Therefore, death has always been associated with a sense of mystery and fear out of the uncertainty and unpredictability, and has been an immortal theme discussed in literature (Hua, 2009). Many symbols of death are manifested in *The Dead*, it will be discussed later.

2.1 Names of Characters

The name of Lily, the caretaker's daughter, symbolizes the death because that lily is often used at funerals, but it also means resurrection and rebirth, the wish of Joyce towards his nation. Because white lilies are regarded as the main flowers in European tradition. Additionally, the name of Gabriel was related to Gabriel, the angel of death in the traditional sense, but he is commonly regarded as one of the messengers who mainly convey messages to God.

2.2 Destiny of Characters

There are three types of the dead (Zhan, 1998). The first one is people who have died, such as the lover of Gretta in her girlhood, Michael Furey. He suffered from tuberculosis when he was seventeen and died later because he waited in the rain under the window to see Gretta before she left home. The second one is people who are about to die. For example, two aunts of Gabriel, they were old and moved into the cold house on Usher's Island thirty years ago, lost touch with the outside besides the choir, which made them stuck in their unchanging world and had no contact with the new things. And Gabriel even thought about the death of Aunt Julia not long after. The third one is those who are alive but have not yet been free from the trauma, that means mentally dead, such as Gabriel's wife Gretta, who cannot forget her former lover. Mary Jane as well, she has lived with her two aunts since the death of her father, and has not married over 30 years old, living on teaching the piano. The young maid Lily seems to be in pain because of the experience of being cheated by a man, so she felt grieved when motioned marriage. Among the guests, Freddy Malins was often drunk, symbolizing the moral paralysis.

As for the protagonist Gabriel, the Morkans' party exposes him as a social performer. He carefully reviews his thoughts and words, and he flounders in situations where he cannot predict another person's feelings. Gabriel's unease with unbridled feeling is palpable, but he must face his discomfort throughout the story. He illustrates the tense intersection of social isolation and personal confrontation. Gabriel has one moment of spontaneous, honest speech, rare in *The Dead* as well as in *Dubliners* as a whole. When he dances with Miss Ivors, she interrogates him about his plans to travel in countries other than Ireland and asks him why he won't stay in Ireland and learn more about his own country. Instead of replying with niceties, Gabriel responds, "I'm sick of my own country, sick of it!" He is the sole character in *Dubliners* to voice his unhappiness with life in Ireland. While each story implicitly or explicitly connects the characters' hardships to Dublin, Gabriel pronounces his sentiment clearly and without remorse. Gabriel delivers his own message not only to Miss Ivors but also to himself and to the readers of *The Dead*. He is the unusual character in *Dubliners* who dwells on his own revelation without suppressing or rejecting it, and who can place himself in a greater perspective. In the final scene of the story, when he intensely contemplates the meaning of his life, Gabriel has a vision not only of his own tedious life but of his role as a human. In addition, Gabriel said, "literature was above politics", but it is the opposite one for me. I believe that literature is always shrouded in the shadow of ideology and cannot be shaken off. Ideology includes politics but is not limited to politics. The understanding of gender, history, and society is also an ideology. Although some writers, such as Keats, advocate negative capability, literary works should avoid their own subjectivity, but I personally think that this is indispensable, because a person's ideology will affect his way of thinking and cognition, often with collective unconsciousness. So ideologically speaking, literature is deceptive to a certain extent, which requires readers to be discerning. But there is no ideological difference in the beauty of literature in terms of form.

The Dead ostensibly portrays a thriving society where everyone lives in harmony and friendship. In essence, Joyce criticized a decadent and lifeless society to reveal the hypocritical appearance of Dublin that seems prosperous. And he attempted to evoke the national spirit by describing insensitive Dubliners.

2.3 Details at the Party

The food on the table also evokes death. The life-giving substance appears at “rival ends” of the table that is lined with parallel rows of various dishes, divided in the middle by “sentries” of fruit and watched from afar by “three squads of bottles.” The military language transforms a table set for a communal feast into a battlefield, reeking with danger and death. Moreover, the topics people talked at the party were either daily trivia or dead people and coffins. For example, Mary Jane said, “*The coffin is to remind them of their last end.*”, and “*the monks never spoke, got up at two in the morning and slept in their coffins*”. In addition, one of the two paintings hanging on the piano also conveys the intention of death, which makes people feel depressed, “...*It was a picture of the two murdered princes in the Tower...*”.

The monotonous routine is also a symbol of the death. The Morkans’ party consists of the kind of deadening routines that make existence so lifeless in Dubliners. The events of the party repeat each year: Gabriel gives a speech, Freddy Malins arrives drunk, everyone dances the same memorized steps, everyone eats. Like the horse that circles around and around the mill in Gabriel’s anecdote, these Dubliners settle into an expected routine at this party. Such tedium fixes the characters in a state of paralysis. They are unable to break from the activities that they know, so they live life without new experiences, numb to the world.

2.4. Disappearance of Irish Culture

The disappearance of Irish culture abounds in the article. Aunt Julia and Mr. Browne are just two typical representatives of the paralysis of Dubliners. In fact, almost everyone in the book is depressed and mentally dying. Furthermore, the conflict between Miss Ivors and Gabriel manifests that she is a radical Irish nationalist, who looks westward, unable to extricate herself from the nostalgia of nationalism; while Gabriel cannot forget the modernity and openness of the cosmopolitan city, who looks eastwards. The former is trapped in narrow narcissism, while the latter is drifting away from roots, neither can satisfy the diverse imagination and construction of the Irish nation.

The British colonialization and the failure of the Irish Independence and the Renaissance Movement led Ireland into a precarious situation. They were unable to drive away the strangers at home, and could not find effective ways to make the country independent and prosperous. Although Joyce loves Ireland and Dublin deeply, he can't stand its backwardness and obscurity, religious parochialism, and the numbness and weakness of his compatriots. However, Joyce still hopes that the lives of the Irish people will be revived, and the national spirit will be awakened, just like spring flowers blooming after melting ice and snow. He firmly believes that the spring of Irish national rejuvenation and cultural prosperity will not be far away after a heavy snowfall.

2.5 Snow

The image of snow appears repeatedly in *The Dead*, and the meaning of snow is beyond the common one. Snow always appears at the end of the year, symbolizing the end of the cycle of four seasons. The heavy snow covers the earth, and it shows the silence, vastness and lifelessness of winter, makes people feel cold. These characteristics always associate snow with death. In the article, snow appeared several times, showing that the protagonist faces death step by step and finally recognizes it.

The image of snow appeared firstly in the article when the Gabriels came in. The first appearance of snow formed a distinctive atmosphere compared with the warm and dull atmosphere of the indoor party.

Gabriel was nervously preparing for the upcoming speech when conflicted with the ridicule from Ivors, and the snow appeared secondly. Gabriel wanted to escape this suffocating party when he looked outside the window. This noisy party is the epitome of the entire life of Irish society, the hustle and bustle, all kinds of guests, dizzying entertainment, deliberate performance and false applause, which makes people aware of the emptiness of life.

The image of snow finally appeared in the last paragraph of *The Dead*, which is my favorite part. Gabriel gazes out of his hotel window, watching the falling snow and reflecting on his wife Gretta’s recent confession about her childhood love, Michael Furey. The accumulated snow suggests this sense of numbness in Gabriel’s character, he is literally frigid to emotion, but also suggests the commonality of this trait. The snow does not fall only outside of Gabriel’s window, but across the country, from the Harbor of Dublin in the east, to the south in Shannon, and to the west. In other words, everyone in everywhere, is as numb as he is.

The limits of life and death are gradually blurred, and everything is shrouded in the eternal power of death. Through the image of snow, Joyce builds a bridge between the living and the dead. Through the emotional disillusionment of a teenager’s first love, the escape of adults in the face of marriage, and the loss of love in the shackles of marriage, Joyce exposes the plight of people in a universal, single-value marriage (Xu, 2019). And Ireland's past romance and modern

mediocrity, the glory it once had, and the various wounds it is experiencing are all symbolically expressed through the heavy snow. The heavy snow not only activated the memory of history, but also awakened the numb desire, it encouraged all Irish people to get out of the predicament and seek the complete liberation of the national spirit. In Yeats' poem, *September 1913*, he wrote, "Romantic Ireland's dead and gone, it's with O'Leary in the grave." However Joyce believes that the winter in modern Ireland will soon pass, a new cultural spring will come. Snow symbolizes the spiritual death of Ireland, but the pure white snow is full of hope for the awakening of national consciousness. Gabriel's thoughts in the final lines of *Dubliners* also suggest that the living might in fact be able to free themselves and live unfettered by deadening routines and the past. Even in January, snow is unusual in Ireland and cannot last forever.

3. Conclusion

Through the discussion of the five symbolic factors of death, I have a deeper understanding of Joyce's philosophy of death. *The Dead* ostensibly portrays a thriving society where everyone lives in harmony and friendship. In essence, Joyce criticized a decadent and lifeless society to reveal the hypocritical appearance of Dublin that seems prosperous. And he attempted to evoke the national spirit by describing insensitive Dubliners. Joyce once said that death is the most beautiful form of survival. *The Dead* was placed at the end of *Dubliners* perhaps emphasizing the sign and connection of death to life. Moreover, the novel is arranged at Christmas, a time of ringing out the Old Year and ring in the New Year, means the confrontation with both death and life, leaving readers with a lot of room for imagination. He has high hopes for the rise of the Irish nation, and the spiritual epiphany of Gabriel has also been given a positive and epochal hue. Through his awakening, the Dubliners know that the hope existed if they clearly recognize the status quo in time, change their attitudes, get out of the conventional shackles, get out of the lonely predicament, and embrace a new life.

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