

Notes on “The Dead” by James Joyce

Summary

At the annual dance and dinner party held by Kate and Julia Morkan and their young niece, Mary Jane Morkan, the housemaid Lily frantically greets guests. Set at or just before the feast of the Epiphany on January 6, which celebrates the manifestation of Christ’s divinity to the Magi, the party draws together a variety of relatives and friends. Kate and Julia particularly await the arrival of their favorite nephew, Gabriel Conroy, and his wife, Gretta. When they arrive, Gabriel attempts to chat with Lily as she takes his coat, but she snaps in reply to his question about her love life. Gabriel ends the uncomfortable exchange by giving Lily a generous tip, but the experience makes him anxious. He relaxes when he joins his aunts and Gretta, though Gretta’s good-natured teasing about his dedication to galoshes irritates him. They discuss their decision to stay at a hotel that evening rather than make the long trip home. The arrival of another guest, the always-drunk Freddy Malins, disrupts the conversation. Gabriel makes sure that Freddy is fit to join the party while the guests chat over drinks in between taking breaks from the dancing. An older gentleman, Mr. Browne, flirts with some young girls, who dodge his advances. Gabriel steers a drunken Freddy toward the drawing room to get help from Mr. Browne, who attempts to sober Freddy up.

The party continues with a piano performance by Mary Jane. More dancing follows, which finds Gabriel paired up with Miss Ivors, a fellow university instructor. A fervent supporter of Irish culture, Miss Ivors embarrasses Gabriel by labeling him a “West Briton” for writing literary reviews for a conservative newspaper. Gabriel dismisses the accusation, but Miss Ivors pushes the point by inviting Gabriel to visit the Aran Isles, where Irish is spoken, during the summer. When Gabriel declines, explaining that he has arranged a cycling trip on the continent, Miss Ivors corners him about his lack of interest in his own country. Gabriel exclaims that he is sick of Ireland. After the dance, he flees to a corner and engages in a few more conversations, but he cannot forget the interlude with Miss Ivors.

Just before dinner, Julia sings a song for the guests. Miss Ivors makes her exit to the surprise of Mary Jane and Gretta, and to the relief of Gabriel. Finally, dinner is ready, and Gabriel assumes his place at the head of the table to carve the goose. After much fussing, everyone eats, and finally Gabriel delivers his speech, in which he praises Kate, Julia, and Mary Jane for their hospitality. Framing this quality as an Irish strength, Gabriel laments the present age in which such hospitality is undervalued. Nevertheless, he insists, people must not linger on the past and the dead, but live and rejoice in the present with the living. The table breaks into a loud applause for Gabriel’s speech, and the entire party toasts their three hostesses.

Later, guests begin to leave, and Gabriel recounts a story about his grandfather and his horse, which forever walked in circles even when taken out of the mill where it worked. After finishing the anecdote, Gabriel realizes that Gretta stands transfixed by the song that Mr. Bartell D’Arcy sings in the drawing room. When the music stops and the rest of the party guests assemble before the door to leave, Gretta remains detached and

thoughtful. Gabriel is enamored with and preoccupied by his wife's mysterious mood and recalls their courtship as they walk from the house and catch a cab into Dublin. At the hotel, Gabriel grows irritated by Gretta's behavior. She does not seem to share his romantic inclinations, and in fact bursts into tears. Gretta confesses that she has been thinking of the song from the party because a former lover had sung it to her in her youth in Galway. Gretta recounts the sad story of this boy, Michael Furey, who died after waiting outside of her window in the cold. Gretta later falls asleep, but Gabriel remains awake, disturbed by Gretta's new information. He curls up on the bed, contemplating his own mortality. Seeing the snow at the window, he envisions it blanketing the graveyard where Michael Furey rests, as well as all of Ireland.

Analysis

In "The Dead," Gabriel Conroy's restrained behavior and his reputation with his aunts as the nephew who takes care of everything mark him as a man of authority and caution, but two encounters with women at the party challenge his confidence. First, Gabriel clumsily provokes a defensive statement from the overworked Lily when he asks her about her love life. Instead of apologizing or explaining what he meant, Gabriel quickly ends the conversation by giving Lily a holiday tip. He blames his prestigious education for his inability to relate to servants like Lily, but his willingness to let money speak for him suggests that he relies on the comforts of his class to maintain distance. The encounter with Lily shows that Gabriel, like his aunts, cannot tolerate a "back answer," but he is unable to avoid such challenges as the party continues. During his dance with Miss Ivors, he faces a barrage of questions about his nonexistent nationalist sympathies, which he doesn't know how to answer appropriately. Unable to compose a full response, Gabriel blurts out that he is sick of his own country, surprising Miss Ivors and himself with his unmeasured response and his loss of control.

Gabriel's unease culminates in his tense night with Gretta, and his final encounter with her ultimately forces him to confront his stony view of the world. When he sees Gretta transfixed by the music at the end of the party, Gabriel yearns intensely to have control of her strange feelings. Though Gabriel remembers their romantic courtship and is overcome with attraction for Gretta, this attraction is rooted not in love but in his desire to control her. At the hotel, when Gretta confesses to Gabriel that she was thinking of her first love, he becomes furious at her and himself, realizing that he has no claim on her and will never be "master." After Gretta falls asleep, Gabriel softens. Now that he knows that another man preceded him in Gretta's life, he feels not jealousy, but sadness that Michael Furey once felt an aching love that he himself has never known. Reflecting on his own controlled, passionless life, he realizes that life is short, and those who leave the world like Michael Furey, with great passion, in fact live more fully than people like himself.

The holiday setting of Epiphany emphasizes the profoundness of Gabriel's difficult awakening that concludes the story and the collection. Gabriel experiences an inward change that makes him examine his own life and human life in general. While many characters in *Dubliners* suddenly stop pursuing what they desire without explanation, this story offers more specific articulation for Gabriel's actions. Gabriel sees himself as a

shadow of a person, flickering in a world in which the living and the dead meet. Though in his speech at the dinner he insisted on the division between the past of the dead and the present of the living, Gabriel now recognizes, after hearing that Michael Furey's memory lives on, that such division is false. As he looks out of his hotel window, he sees the falling snow, and he imagines it covering Michael Furey's grave just as it covers those people still living, as well as the entire country of Ireland. The story leaves open the possibility that Gabriel might change his attitude and embrace life, even though his somber dwelling on the darkness of Ireland closes *Dubliners* with morose acceptance. He will eventually join the dead and will not be remembered.

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. Even the food on the table 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.

"The Dead" encapsulates the themes developed in the entire collection and serves as a balance to the first story, "The Sisters." Both stories piercingly explore the intersection of life and death and cast a shadow over the other stories. More than any other story, however, "The Dead" squarely addresses the state of Ireland in this respect. In his speech, Gabriel claims to lament the present age in which hospitality like that of the Morkan family is undervalued, but at the same time he insists that people must not linger on the past, but embrace the present. Gabriel's words betray him, and he ultimately encourages a tribute to the past, the past of hospitality, that lives on in the present party. His later thoughts reveal this attachment to the past when he envisions snow as "general all over Ireland." In every corner of the country, snow touches both the dead and the living, uniting them in frozen paralysis. However, Gabriel's thoughts in the final lines of *Dubliners* 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.