

The Dead



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JAMES JOYCE

James Joyce grew up in Rathgar, a suburb of Dublin, and studied at University College, where he began to publish literary reviews, poems, and plays. After college, he moved to Paris where he briefly studied medicine. In 1903, just one year later, Joyce's mother got sick and he moved back to Dublin to take care of her. After meeting his wife, the couple left Dublin and lived in a variety of countries including Yugoslavia and Italy, and later fled to Zurich during World War I. Joyce only returned to Dublin four times, but many of his works remain heavily focused on the city, and on Ireland more generally. Joyce received guidance from the poet Ezra Pound, who helped him publish his first novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in 1916. Two years earlier, Joyce had published *Dubliners*, his first book, which was a collection of 15 short stories, including "The Dead." These books brought Joyce some fame as a Modernist writer, a fame that only increased after the publication of *Ulysses* (1922), which upon release was both hailed as a masterpiece and banned in numerous countries for indecency. Joyce continued writing after *Ulysses*, producing the even more avant-garde *Finnegans Wake* in 1939. Joyce was always a heavy drinker, and he died in 1941 from complications after having surgery on a perforated ulcer.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Dead," and all of the stories in *Dubliners*, take place during the rise of Irish Nationalism. At the time, Ireland was under the control of Great Britain, and the Nationalist movement, also known as Irish Republicanism in its more radical form, rejected British control in favor of Irish independence. The majority of Irish nationalists were Catholic, but the movement was not supported by the Catholic Church, as many nationalists believed in violent methods and the use of force. Gabriel seems to lean away from these nationalist sentiments, as he writes a column for the *Daily Express*, which was a unionist (England-supporting) newspaper that had the highest circulation of any newspaper in Ireland during its peak. James Joyce is said to have written columns for this publication as well. When Miss Ivors calls Gabriel a "West Briton," she's using a derogatory term for an Irish person who greatly admires England or Britain.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

There are 15 stories total in *Dubliners*, Joyce's first published collection of short stories that portrays the middle-class in

early 20th-century Dublin, and "The Dead" is the longest and final story in the collection. The characters in Joyce's *Dubliners* stories usually experience some kind of epiphany, or a grand (or anti-devastating) realization about life or themselves. Many of the characters are also featured in Joyce's later work, *Ulysses*. Joyce makes several literary references in "The Dead," the most prominent being Gabriel's decision to quote Robert Browning, an English Victorian poet known to be obscure and difficult, in his speech. The text also references Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Gabriel notices a picture of the famous "balcony scene" early on in the text, which foreshadows Gretta's memory of her final meeting with Michael Furey, where she stands on the balcony as he calls to her from the garden below.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Dead
- **When Written:** Summer of 1904
- **Where Written:** Unknown, but not Dublin. Somewhere in Croatia or Italy – Joyce moved around a lot during this period.
- **When Published:** Originally published in the *Irish Homestead* on September 10th, 1904, later revised and published in *Dubliners* in 1914.
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Short Fiction
- **Setting:** 20th Century Dublin
- **Climax:** Gabriel learns of his wife's lingering feelings for her first love, whom she believes to have died for her, and comes to several devastating realizations about mortality, passion, and love

EXTRA CREDIT

Biblical Inspiration. Joyce seems to have sprinkled in numerous Biblical references in this story, which is set just before the Christian holiday of the Epiphany. Biblical characters are said to have inspired many of the names Joyce chose in "The Dead." The main character, Gabriel, could be a reference to the archangel Gabriel, who announces the birth of John the Baptist to Zacharias and warns Mary of the coming of the Messiah. Gabriel's brother Constantine is a reference to Constantine the Great, a Roman Emperor who brought Christianity to the forefront of religious life. Both of these names suggest that Mrs. Conroy had great ambitions for her sons. Additionally Lily, the caretaker's daughter, whom Gabriel offends in the opening scene, could be a reference to the flower often associated with the Virgin Mary.

Silver Screen Dreams. The important role of music and the overall ambiance of the story have inspired several theatrical reproductions. The most well known reproduction is the 1987 film, "The Dead," which was adapted by John Huston. The film features an all-Irish cast and was nominated for two Oscars. Due to the large role that music plays in the story, "The Dead" also lent itself to numerous reproductions for musical theater.



PLOT SUMMARY

The story begins with Lily, Julia, Mary Jane, and Kate welcoming guests to their annual Christmas party in Dublin. Lily is taking the men's coats, while Julia and Kate are attending to the female party guests. It is already after ten o'clock when Gabriel—the protagonist and nephew of Julia and Kate—and his wife Gretta finally arrive. When Lily takes Gabriel's coat, he notices that she has matured into an attractive young woman and remarks that she is approaching the age for marriage, but Lily snaps at his remark. Gabriel offers her a tip, which he insists she accept in the Christmas spirit. She awkwardly thanks him as he heads upstairs to the party, still brooding over her bitter retort. As he joins the party, Gabriel glances at the notes for the speech he is to make later on that night, wondering whether quoting Robert Browning will be too obscure and complicated for his audience. Gretta and Gabriel's aunts come out of the dressing room and greet Gabriel, who is their favorite nephew. Gretta tells Kate and Julia of Gabriel's strange preference for galoshes, and he explains that they're very popular on the continent. Freddy Malins arrives and the conversation dissolves. Aunt Kate asks Gabriel to keep an eye on Freddy, as he is known to show up intoxicated. As the waltz finishes, another man, Mr. Browne, takes three younger women into the back room and serves them all strong drinks, flirting until the women lose interest. Kate and another party guest enter the room and announce it is time to pair up for the next waltz.

As Mary Jane is finishing her piano performance, Gabriel's mind drifts to his dead mother to whom he attributes many of his accomplishments but also resented because of her disapproval of Gretta. The next dance begins and Gabriel finds himself paired with his colleague, Miss Ivors. He notices that she is wearing a Celtic knot brooch and she almost immediately brings up the fact that she has seen Gabriel's column in *The Daily Express*, a publication known for its unionist and conservative leanings. She jokingly calls him a "West Briton" and scolds him for his anti-nationalist sentiments. Then, quickly trying to lighten the mood, Miss Ivors invites Gabriel and his wife to come along on a summer trip to the Aran Isles in the west of Ireland. Gabriel declines, informing her of his plans to go on a cycling trip somewhere on the continent, and Miss Ivors accuses him of a lack of interest in his own country. Gabriel grows agitated and snaps back that he is sick of Ireland. The

exchange leaves him in a bitter mood, as he believes Miss Ivors was trying to humiliate him. Gabriel tells Gretta about Miss Ivors' invitation and Gretta is disappointed at his refusal. Gretta leaves to socialize and Gabriel resolves to get revenge on Miss Ivors by subtly insulting her in his speech.

Aunt Julia sings a song, which leads to a discussion about the pope's decision to ban women from the Church's choirs. Aunt Kate passionately criticizes the decision but is clearly hesitant to critique the pope, while Mary Jane tries to defuse the tension from Aunt Kate's passionate outburst by declaring it time for dinner. As the guests head to the dining room, Gabriel catches sight of Miss Ivors collecting her coat while Gretta and Mary Jane try to persuade her to stay. Miss Ivors insists on leaving, so Gabriel offers to walk her home, but she definitively declines and hurries out the door. He wonders if their unpleasant interaction is what caused her to leave. Aunt Kate calls Gabriel in to carve the goose, which puts his mind at ease, as he feels very comfortable at the head of the table. The guests discuss opera, but Gabriel does not participate in the conversation, and he is the only guest to pass up the **brown** pudding that Aunt Julia has prepared. After the guests finish eating, dessert is served and drinks are replenished in preparation for Gabriel's speech. In his speech he praises his aunts and the values of their generation, emphasizing the importance of maintaining traditional values like hospitality. The speech ends with a toast, and the guests sing "For he's a jolly good fellow."

The guests gather in the hall to say goodbye. Gabriel tells a story about his grandfather Patrick Morkan, who was a glue-boiler, and who once took his horse, Johnny, out to the park. The horse began walking in circles around the statue of King Billy incessantly, as though he were back in the mill or had fallen in love with the stone horse King Billy was riding. The guests laugh at the story and then start to say goodbye. As the guests leave, Gabriel notices a woman on the stairs whose face is hidden in the **shadows** and soon realizes it's his wife, listening to piano music drifting down the stairs. The music stops and the remaining guests head out into the cold, dark night to find a cab together. Gabriel watches Gretta walking next to Mr. Bartell D'Arcy up ahead and feels a sudden tenderness towards her. He is struck with nostalgia, and is flooded with all of their earliest memories together. He wishes they could escape from their dull present-day life and go back to these early times together.

The group catches a cab and rides mostly in silence until Gretta and Gabriel get out. As Gretta leans on Gabriel, he is suddenly overcome by lust. They approach the entry to the hotel where they are staying, and Gabriel feels as though they are escaping from their dull lives. The porter lights a candle and leads them to their room, which is mostly dark except for a "ghostly light" coming through the **window**. Gabriel can see that Gretta is preoccupied by something, and so he momentarily suppresses

his feelings of lust and asks her what she is thinking about. Gretta unexpectedly bursts into tears and admits that she was thinking of the song she was listening to on the stairs. She tells Gabriel it reminds her of her childhood love, Michael Furey. Gabriel is angered by the idea that Gretta was thinking of another man while he had been thinking of no one but her. He asks if she had wanted to join Miss Ivors on the summer trip to Galway in order to visit this boy, and Gretta tells Gabriel the boy is dead. She says that Michael was employed in the gasworks, and that he died from visiting her in the rain while he was ill – he died for *her*. Gabriel is filled with terror by the idea that another man loved his wife enough to die for her. Gretta falls asleep and as Gabriel watches her, he suddenly realizes that he has never experienced a passion worth dying for, and that his wife is an individual with her own past experiences, and he has played a relatively small role in her life. Gabriel suddenly senses the world of the dead, and sees his own life fading, meaningless, into this “**grey** impalpable world.” He hears the **snow** falling outside, indiscriminately covering all things living and dead.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Gabriel Conroy – The story’s protagonist, a middle-aged Dublin teacher and writer. Gabriel’s name, which means “man of God” in Hebrew, carries Biblical significance, as it is the name of the angel who announces the coming of the Messiah to the Virgin Mary. He is Kate and Julia’s favorite nephew, and the son of their sister, Ellen, who has died. Gabriel seeks validation from the women in his life. His aunts continually praise him and he runs small errands for them in return. However, he allows his male pride and desire for female validation to distract him from having meaningful interactions with women, and he often fails to see how his words and actions affect the female characters. Additionally Gabriel is distracted by nostalgia, and fails to find passion in the present. He is very interested in England and the continent, and generally detests Dublin life. At the end of the story Gabriel comes to the realization that he has failed to find true love or passion in his life, and that he is on track to live a meaningless life and die a meaningless death.

Gretta Conroy – Gabriel’s wife, a good-natured and kind woman. She does not hate Dublin as Gabriel does, and finds his interest in things like galoshes to be ridiculous. She reveals the story of her first love, Michael Furey, to Gabriel on the night of the party. Gretta believes that Michael died for her sake, and for this reason, she is also distracted by the past and unable to focus on finding love and passion in the present.

Lily – The caretaker’s daughter who helps attend to the party guests. She seems to have known the family since she was a child, since Gabriel remembers when she was little and “used to

sit on the lowest step nursing a rag doll.” Lily has a good relationship with Kate, Julia, and Mary Jane as she rarely makes mistakes. She becomes bitter when Gabriel makes a comment about her being of the age to marry.

Kate Morkan (Aunt Kate) – Gabriel’s aunt, who lives and is hosting the dinner party with her sister Julia, and niece, Mary Jane. She is a musician who gives piano lessons in their home, since she is “too feeble to go about much.” As far as physical appearance goes, Kate seems to be the most lively of Gabriel’s aunts, with a face like a “red apple” and a long braid of a “ripe nut color.” Kate feels strongly about the Catholic Church’s decision to ban women from church choirs, but she is conflicted because she also believes the pope is infallible. She downplays her own opinions about this to avoid offending others, even though she feels passionately about the issue.

Julia Morkan (Aunt Julia) – Gabriel’s other aunt, who is also hosting the annual Christmas party along with Kate and Mary Jane. She works as the leading soprano in Adam and Eve’s, which is a popular Dublin name for the Church of the Immaculate Conception. According to the text she has “not aged well” and is described as having **gray** hair and a gray face, further emphasizing her age. She has trouble understanding Gabriel’s speech and is often confused. Towards the end of the text, Gabriel imagines her funeral, which he believes will happen soon in the very same house.

Mary Jane – Kate and Julia’s niece. Her father Pat died and her aunts took her into their care around thirty years ago. Now she plays the organ at Haddington Road. She acts as a peace keeper throughout the night, diffusing tension when the discussion turns too controversial. She is the third of the “Three Graces” Gabriel describes in his speech, along with his two aunts.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Molly Ivors – Gabriel’s colleague who appears to be a staunch Irish nationalist. She aggressively teases Gabriel for his contributions to a unionist publication, pejoratively calling him a “West Briton.” She leaves the party early, possibly because she is upset by her interaction with Gabriel.

Mr. Browne – Another guest at the party. His surname proves significant as Joyce uses the color **brown** throughout *Dubliners* to signify the drabness of Dublin life. He continually makes jokes involving his name throughout the night. He represents the simple Dublin man that Gabriel sees as inferior.

Freddy Malins – A guest at the party with a known drinking problem. The hostesses are concerned he will make a scene so they put Gabriel in charge of him.

Mrs. Malins – Freddy Malin’s mother, who is overwhelmingly silent during the festivities, except when she mentions that her son is going to stay at a Monastery, which implies he is perhaps seeking treatment for alcoholism.

Miss Daly – A minor guest at the party.

Miss Power – A minor guest at the party.

Miss Furlong – A guest at the party.

Mr. Kerrigan – A minor guest at the party.

Mr. Bartell D’Arcy – A famous tenor vocalist who is present at the Christmas party. All of Dublin is raving about his voice.

Patrick Morkan – Gabriel’s grandfather who owned a starch mill. Gabriel recounts the story of his grandfather’s horse, Johnny, who walked in circles around King Billy’s statue.

Gabriel’s Mother – Though she is deceased, Gabriel attributes his accomplishments to his mother. She disapproved of Gabriel’s marriage to Gretta, however, and Gabriel resents her for this.

Constantine – Gabriel’s brother.

Miss O’Callaghan A guest at the party.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



JEALOUSY AND MALE PRIDE

Throughout “The Dead,” the protagonist Gabriel is strongly influenced by his interactions with women, which often spur jealousy and injure his pride. He

places a great deal of emphasis on how women react to him, regardless of whether they are a romantic interest or not. His pride is also nurtured by his strong adherence to his role as a man and his desire to “master” his wife.

Gabriel seems to take a lot of pride in his masculinity, but when he seeks validation from female characters, he is often let down. What he does not realize is that these interactions often leave the female characters just as wounded. In the opening scene, Gabriel seeks female validation in his interaction with Lily, the caretaker’s daughter whom he has known since she was a girl. On this night, he suddenly notices her physique and complexion, realizing she is no longer the child he knew her as. Gabriel makes a comment about her being of the age to marry, and is immediately hurt when she responds with a bitter remark about men. Gabriel is hurt by “the girl’s bitter and sudden retort” and continues to linger in the “gloom” it has cast over him. Instead of leaving her alone, Gabriel tries to tip her to make himself feel better. Lily wants to reject his tip as she rejected what he intended as a compliment, but this time Gabriel insists that she take it. After he forces his tip on her, she has no choice but to thank him, suddenly changing the dynamic:

Lily can no longer be offended, but feels obligated to express gratitude instead. Soon after, Gabriel’s brief conversation with his colleague, Miss Ivors, leaves him with an unpleasant feeling and a desire for revenge. He seems to believe she was maliciously trying to “make him look ridiculous before people, heckling him and staring at him with her rabbit’s eyes.” In reality, it seems that Gabriel is the one who has upset Miss Ivors, as she leaves the party before dinner and refuses to let anyone walk her home. Gabriel is blinded by his pride and is unable to see how these interactions affect the women involved. His comment about marriage clearly conjured up some negative experiences for Lily, spurring her bitter remark about men, and his interaction with Miss Ivors causes her to leave the party in a rush.

Gabriel’s pride is also affected by his ability to fulfill his masculine role. Throughout the evening it appears that Gabriel feels most comfortable when he is finally seated at the head of the table, serving meat to the guests, as he “liked nothing better than to find himself at the head of a well-laden table.” This highlights Gabriel’s need to fulfill a typical male role, and his resulting insecurity when this doesn’t happen. Part of Gabriel’s desire for female approval stems from his relationships with his aunts, who flatter him endlessly and reinforce his role as the man of the family. His aunts are the ones who put him at the head of the table to serve the meat. In return, Gabriel seems to cater to his aunts, helping when they ask him to. Later in the text, after Gabriel realizes his wife was thinking of another man, he becomes ashamed, and begins to see himself as a “ludicrous figure, acting as a penny boy for his aunts.” Suddenly Gabriel sees running simple errands for his aunts as an assault to his masculinity, and he finds shame in even this commonplace action.

Gabriel’s almost irrepressible lust for Gretta marks their interactions in the second half of the text, and also spurs his jealousy and anger at her feelings for her first love. While he is thinking about how much he wants to overpower her, she is overcome with sadness, lamenting the loss of her former lover, Michael Furey. Gabriel’s jealousy is driven completely by his lust for his wife, and his desire to “master” her. Initially, when Gabriel finds out she is thinking of her former lover, he is angry and jealous rather than sad or disappointed. Gabriel’s feelings toward his wife are complicated, and he definitely feels genuine tenderness towards her—however, the text implies that he does not truly “love” her, or at least not in the way that Michael Furey loved her. Gabriel “had never felt like that himself towards any woman but he knew that such a feeling must be love.” If Gabriel loved his wife or if he didn’t let his feelings of pride, lust, and anger get in the way of his feelings for her, his jealousy could perhaps be justified as a byproduct of unrequited love. Instead, Gabriel’s jealousy is a result of his selfish desire to control Gretta, his own insecurity, and his fear of competition. Gabriel has to finally get past his jealousy and

lust in order to have the realization that he has not experienced love in the same way his wife has with her previous lover. Gabriel's reaction when his wife says she thinks Michael Furey died for her is "terror," which only serves to highlight his insecurity. He feels threatened by this dead man, as though "some impalpable and vindictive being was coming against him, gathering forces against him in its vague world." Once Gabriel allows his initial terror and jealousy to fade, however, he reaches his epiphany and is no longer filled with anger and lust, but sadness. He looks at his wife "unresentfully" while she sleeps and realizes "how poor a part he, her husband, had played in her life."

Gabriel's epiphany is similar to that of the narrator in "Araby," as they both come to the realization that they are experiencing feelings that are more commonplace and shallow than what they had first imagined. Gabriel's strong desire for his wife was lust, a common occurrence, but the real pain in his epiphany comes from the fact that his wife has already experienced a deeper connection to a man other than himself. Once Gabriel is able to get past his male pride and jealousy, he is able to see that he was too distracted by his pride and desire for female approval and submission and so he never sought out or experienced real love.



NOSTALGIA AND THE PAST VS. THE PRESENT

As with many of the other characters in *Dubliners*, both Gabriel and Gretta often find themselves paralyzed and unable to take control over their lives. In this case, much of their resulting inaction is due to distraction from the present by their overpowering nostalgic feelings about the past.

Gretta allows her past feelings for Michael Furey to distract her from her current relationship with Gabriel on the night of the party. Meanwhile, as Gabriel is looking back nostalgically on his relationship with Gretta, Gretta is thinking of someone else from an even more distant past. Instead of living in the moment and trying to nurture her current relationship, she is still caught up in her idealistic memories of her former lover.

Gabriel's views of the past become clear in his speech when he talks about the value of "cherishing the memory of" these good old days during gatherings like the dinner. He focuses on the past – basically highlighting the importance of remembering the good and forgetting the bad. At the end, Gabriel vows not to dwell on the past, but he is really only talking about the "gloomy" part of the past. This means that he wants to focus on only the good things from the past, which is what propels these feelings of nostalgia and Gabriel and Gretta's idealization of the past, and in effect of the dead.

Gabriel, Gretta, and many of the other characters in "Dubliners" allow their preoccupations with the past to distract

them from the present. Joyce thus exemplifies the dangers of idealizing the past, but the same time makes a more subtle point, highlighting the fact that nostalgia is a very individual feeling, and the past often includes events that other people will never fully understand. In this case, Gabriel is feeling nostalgic for the beginning of his relationship with Gretta—but meanwhile she is pining for a past love that was even more powerful. Nostalgia is a very personal feeling, and each individual has their own relationship to the past that others may never fully understand.



DEATH

"The Dead" deals with both literal and metaphorical death. Additionally, these perceptions of those who have died are often tainted by nostalgia, making it hard for the characters to forget about their glorified memories of the past and begin living in the present.

Much of "The Dead" quite fittingly revolves around dead people and the legacies they leave behind. For both Gabriel and Gretta, the dead have a power greater than those living. The most obvious example is Gretta's ex-lover, Michael Furey, whom she believes died as a martyr for her love. Regardless of how briefly they knew each other, and how long ago it was, she seems to believe that this was the purest form of love she has ever received. Gabriel, in turn, is terrified of Michael – since he is already dead, his reputation cannot be changed. Gabriel seems to see Michael Furey as having some sort of otherworldly power over his wife that he could not possibly compete with. When Gabriel's wife confesses that she thinks Michael died for her, Gabriel is struck with terror and the feeling that "some impalpable and vindictive being was coming against him, gathering forces against him in its vague world." Of course Michael Furey does not physically pose a threat, but instead he holds a power over Gretta's emotions and that is what Gabriel fears. Gabriel also thinks of his dead mother, who seems to have contributed greatly to her sons' successes, including Gabriel's degree from Royal University. However, Gabriel is also able to think of some sour memories of her, namely her disapproval of his marriage to Gretta. In the end Gabriel lets this go, however, choosing to focus on his more positive memories, and again succumbing to nostalgia and idealization of the dead.

A crucial part of Gabriel's final "epiphany" concerns death as well—the acceptance that death is universal and constantly approaching. Just as the **snow** falls everywhere in Ireland, death will too. It does not see class or religion or race. Gabriel starts to experience these feelings after Gretta is asleep, and he begins to think of his Aunt Julia, and how she will "soon be a shade with the shade of Patrick Morkan and his horse." Gabriel realizes that they are all equal in a way, and that death will come for Julia, just as it came for their father. Gabriel then imagines her funeral.

Gabriel's realization that death is universal, or as he puts it: "One by one they were all becoming shades," coincides with his realization that his life has been passionless and empty of meaning. Gabriel realizes that he envies Michael Furey not because of his power over Gretta's emotions, but instead because he experienced passion and love that he was willing to die for. Gabriel sums it up by saying "Better to pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion than fade and wither dimly with age." His grand realization is that he is currently on the latter path, living a meaningless life until he will die a meaningless death.



IRELAND, ANTI-NATIONALISM, AND THE FOREIGN

Gabriel is not happy to be in Dublin, and is taken with the rest of the UK and continental Europe in every way – from the fashion trends to the literature to the vacation destinations. It seems as though Gabriel would seek an escape, like many of the other characters in *Dubliners*, but he also seems to be in denial about his own dissatisfaction with his life. Instead, his desire for an escape is shown more through his lack of patriotism and his obsession with all things foreign.

Gabriel seems to see everywhere outside of Ireland as a bit exotic, and generally superior in every way. Gabriel's admiration for everything foreign emphasizes his discontent with Ireland. His interest in continental Europe manifests itself in everything from his choice to wear galoshes, which are popular on the continent, to his choice to quote English poet Robert Browning, to his choice to vacation in Belgium and France rather than exploring other parts of Ireland. This glorification of all things foreign also comes up in the conversation between Mr. Browne and Mr. Bartell D'Arcy, when they are talking about where all the good singers have gone. Mr. Bartell D'Arcy speculates that they are in London, Paris, or Milan. Gabriel is not the only one who feels that Dublin is not exactly the place where great talent chooses to be.

While Gabriel does not really seem to be conscious of his desire for an escape, it is implicit in his anti-nationalist sentiments towards Ireland. He has a condescending attitude toward Dublin and Dubliners, and seems to think everyone there is a bit stupid. He wonders if they will understand the Robert Browning quote he has chosen to include in his speech, as though anything from outside of Ireland would be much too obscure and complicated for his simple Dublin family members. He imagines Shakespeare or the more comprehensible Irish melodies of Thomas Moore would have been more accessible for them. Miss Ivors also criticizes Gabriel for writing a column in "The Daily Express," an anti-nationalist newspaper, but he does not see any problems with this. She teases him, calling him a "West Briton," which is someone who sympathizes with England. Gabriel denies this teasing accusation, but it seems to align with his sentiments toward England and his distaste for

Ireland. The difference between Gabriel and many of the other characters in *Dubliners* seems to be that Gabriel is in denial, or at least cannot quite explain or justify his need to escape Dublin, although he does not refute this desire. He exclaims that he's "sick" of his own country during his conversation with Miss Ivors, but when she asks him why, he does not answer her.

Just as many of Joyce's other characters in *Dubliners* get caught up in an idealized version of exotic lands they actually know nothing about, Gabriel gets caught up in an idealized version of the rest of Europe. While Gabriel's desire for an escape and obsession with the "exotic" is much less obvious than in many of the other *Dubliners* stories, it greatly influences Gabriel's attitude towards Dublin, his life, and his sense of superiority to other Dubliners. Unlike the other stories in *Dubliners*, Joyce is using "The Dead" as less of a critique of Dublin life, but more so a critique of Gabriel's idealization of everything foreign and his condescending attitude toward Dublin and Dubliners.



WOMEN AND SOCIETY

While this story is written from a male perspective, women play a large role in highlighting the injustices of Dublin society as well as Gabriel's reliance on the gender roles imposed by society. The most obvious way that Joyce critiques the role of women in 19th-century Dublin is in his critique of the Catholic Church. Aunt Kate expresses her anger towards the Church and pope for banning women from participating in church choirs. She calls it "not at all honorable," which seems to be an understatement for how she actually feels. Aunt Kate is unable to reconcile her outrage at the pope's decision with her belief that both the pope and the Church are infallible, and in the end she ends up dismissing her previous anger by saying she's only a "stupid old woman" and of course she would never question the pope. Because she is a woman in Dublin society, Aunt Kate must refrain from making too strong of a statement, especially when she is accused of offending a man, in this case Mr. Browne. Joyce uses this interaction to expose the hypocrisy of Catholics who must accept every decision the Church makes since it is supposedly infallible, even if they really disagree with it. He also draws attention to women's role in society by showing that Aunt Kate is unable to fully express herself or make a strong statement since women are expected to behave mildly and keep the peace, especially in social settings.

Most of Joyce's statements about women's roles in society are made through how the male characters, namely Gabriel, see and interact with the female characters. Gabriel feels proud of Gretta's "grace and wifely carriage." He likes that she sticks to her role as a wife and does not try to challenge his authority like the other women he interacts with. He seems to be attracted to her frailty and he longs "to defend her against something." These observations indicate that women were expected to act frail and helpless and that these were attractive qualities to

men. To Gabriel, gender roles seem to be centered completely around power. He desires his wife primarily because he desires to “overmaster” her. “To take her as she was would be brutal. ... he longed to be the master of her strange mood.” Gabriel also uses Gretta’s sudden display of affection (when she surprises him by kissing him once they are back at the hotel) to boost his confidence, wondering why he had been so “diffident” in the first place. Joyce includes Gabriel’s internal dialogue to show that he, much like society, only sees women as something to dominate and that he can use to gage his own prowess and boost his confidence.

While at first glance “The Dead” does not seem to be centered around women, the female characters play a large role and Gabriel’s attitudes toward them reflect society’s attitudes. Gabriel’s epiphany at the end of the story comes when he realizes that his marriage has been based on superficial feelings and vague attraction. He has only sought affirmation from women—he has never sought true love like Gretta once had. He also begins to realize that Gretta has had a past of her own, and that he will never truly understand it. She has had her own individual experiences independent of her experiences with him. This realization, that Gretta is an individual, highlights the fact that women are often seen as objects more than subjects—people who might be idealized and beloved, but who are mostly there to be used by men. It’s implied that many men, as Gabriel, never think about the fact that their wives are people separate from themselves, with their own agency and complicated and vast experiences outside of how they relate to men.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



SNOW

Throughout the text all manifestations of winter—cold, the color white, snow, and the season itself—usually represent mortality. The fact that snow falls indiscriminately “on both the living and the dead” all over Dublin highlights the fact that many Dubliners are living meaningless lives and are essentially dead while alive. As Gabriel enters the house there is “a light fringe of snow” on his coat and galoshes. This use of snow and cold in relation to Gabriel’s body accentuates his relationship with death. As we later learn, Gabriel feels (or learns himself) that it would be better to die young for passion, as Michael Furey, than to live a long empty life, as he is doing.

This indiscriminate quality of snow, which is said to be falling all over Ireland, highlights the fact that mortality is universal, and also serves to unite the living and the dead. Some of the living,

like Gabriel, have not really lived, and some of the dead, like Michael Furey, hold significance equal to that of the living, as in Gretta’s mind. So the living and the dead are not really that different, and the snow is a reminder that everyone will end with the same fate.



LIGHT AND DARK

Traditionally light symbolizes truth or knowledge, and the dark symbolizes ignorance. This holds true in “The Dead” as well. Even in the opening scene, Gabriel calls out to his wife Gretta “I’ll follow” from the dark. The dark is used frequently in Joyce’s descriptions of Gretta, which highlights the fact that Gabriel does not know everything about Gretta, as he soon realizes. As she stands on the stairs partially obscured by the shadows, Gabriel does not even realize it is his wife at first. Later, when they arrive at the hotel, Gabriel sends the porter away with the candle, insisting that they have plenty of light coming in from the street. This represents his choice to stay ignorant or rather his previous inability to seek out a deeper meaning or passion in life. In the end of the text, it is the illumination of the **snow** by the lamplight that leads to Gabriel’s epiphany. Suddenly he is able to see that everyone is approaching death, but also that everyone has the potential to find passion and love in their lives, no matter how short.



WINDOWS

Windows indicate separation, and in “The Dead” this is the separation between warmth and cold, between outside and inside. Windows also serve as a metaphorical barrier between the living and the dead, and between passion and emptiness. In the very last scene, there is a “ghostly **light**” coming in through the window in the hotel room. That ghostly light eventually becomes a metaphor for Gabriel’s epiphany – the light symbolizes his realization, and the fact that it is “ghostly” is due to the morbid nature of his epiphany. It is also the sound of **snow** falling against the window that spurs Gabriel’s realization about mortality.



GREY

The color grey is used repeatedly to represent death. The most common instance of this symbol is in Joyce’s descriptions of Gabriel’s Aunt Julia. Julia has grey hair and a grey face, and has “not aged well.” It seems this is not only true physically, but mentally as well. She often seems confused and wears an expression that gives her the appearance of “a woman who did not know where she was or where she was going.” The use of grey as a symbol for death is reinforced at the end of the text when Gabriel imagines returning to the same house for Aunt Julia’s funeral. Soon after, Gabriel feels his own identity “fading into a grey impalpable

world,” meaning the world of the dead.



BROWN

Often embodied by the character Mr. Browne, the color brown represents the drab-ness of Dublin.

This opinion is most clear when Mary Jane remarks “Browne is out there, Aunt Kate” and Aunt Kate responds with “Browne is everywhere.” Outside, brown is everywhere, meaning that Dublin is a rather dull city.

Aunt Julia also bakes a pudding for the event, but warns the party guests that it’s “not quite brown enough.” Ironically Gabriel is the only guest who does not try the pudding, as he is not a fan of sweets. However, this is symbolic of the fact that he is the only party guest who is not a fan of Dublin life either.

experiences outside of their marriage, that he becomes more open to the possibility of seeing women as individuals and relating to them outside of his own pride and need for validation.

☞ He was undecided about the lines from Robert Browning for he feared they would be above the heads of his hearers...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.

Related Characters: Gabriel Conroy, Lily

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 179

Explanation and Analysis


Gabriel is worried that if he quotes English poet Robert Browning, who is known to be particularly obscure and difficult to understand, his audience will not understand, and will additionally think he is flaunting his superior education. The fact that Gabriel has chosen an English poet is significant, because he sees everything even slightly foreign as superior. This is also why he doubts his audience’s abilities to understand. He sees his fellow Dubliners as ignorant and less cultured, or perhaps even less intelligent.

It becomes clear that Gabriel’s pride is greatly influenced not only by women, but also by his intellectualism. Gabriel draws the parallel himself, predicting that his speech will “fail” just as his efforts to interact with and perhaps compliment Lily had also “failed.”

Section 2 Quotes

☞ It was she who had chosen the names for her sons for she was very sensible of the dignity of family life. Thanks to her, Constantine was now senior curate in Balbriggan and, thanks to her, Gabriel himself had taken his degree in the Royal University. A shadow passed over his face as he remembered her sullen opposition to his marriage.

Related Characters: Gabriel Conroy, Gabriel’s Mother, Constantine, Gretta Conroy

Related Themes:  



QUOTES



Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *Dubliners* published in 1993.

Section 1 Quotes

☞ The girl glanced back at him over her shoulder and said with great bitterness: The men that is now is only palaver and what they can get out of you.

Gabriel coloured as if he felt he had made a mistake and, without looking at her, kicked off his galoshes...

Related Characters: Lily (speaker), Gabriel Conroy

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

This is the first instance in the text where Gabriel finds his pride wounded by a woman. He has just asked Lily, the caretaker’s daughter, if she has plans to get married soon—and she responds with this bitter condemnation of all men her own age. Gabriel then does not seem to understand that her bitter words may come from her own personal experience with a man and may have nothing to do with him. Instead, Gabriel is wounded by Lily’s remark and even feels the need to compensate her financially, handing her a tip so she is forced to thank him awkwardly. Because Gabriel relies so much on female validation, he is unable to see women as individuals. This is why Gabriel takes Lily’s remark so personally and is unable to imagine how she feels and why. It is not until later in the text, when he begins to understand that his wife has had her own individual

Page Number: 187

Explanation and Analysis

Gabriel's mind suddenly wanders to his mother, and the role of nostalgia begins to manifest itself in the text. He credits many of his and Constantine's achievements to his mother, and seems to remember many good aspects about her, such as her value of family life. Gabriel also remembers some bitter memories, such as her lack of respect for Gretta, but ultimately he lets these feelings go, and as he says later in his speech, decides to focus on the positive aspects of the past. This can be dangerous, however, as idealized memories of the past tend to distract the characters in "The Dead" from the present.

The theme of the constant presence of death also comes into play here; even though Gabriel's mother is dead, he still credits her with his own accomplishments, even in the present. This exemplifies the idea that the dead sometimes have a more powerful influence on the living than other living people.

☛ ...Gabriel tried to banish from his mind all memory of the unpleasant incident with Miss Ivors. Of course the girl or woman, or whatever she was, was an enthusiast but there was a time for all things. Perhaps he ought not to have answered her like that. But she had no right to call him a West Briton before people, even in joke. She had tried to make him ridiculous before people, heckling him and staring at him with her rabbit's eyes.

Related Characters: Gabriel Conroy, Molly Ivors

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 191

Explanation and Analysis

Part of the reason Gabriel takes his interaction with Miss Ivors so seriously is because she is a woman, and she has managed to injure his pride and embarrass him. In the conversation preceding this quote, Miss Ivors has called Gabriel out for his anti-nationalism, and even teasingly called him a "West Briton" (an Irishman loyal to England). Once again Gabriel perceives the interaction as a personal assault, when in reality Miss Ivors is probably just using it as an opportunity to voice her strong political opinions. However, since she is a woman, Gabriel feels this is an assault on his pride and a deliberate attempt to humiliate

him, and he responds—even if only in his thoughts—by belittling her appearance. Gabriel is particularly offended by her use of the pejorative term "West Briton." Miss Ivors is an Irish Nationalist, and Gabriel does not hold these views, as he apparently believes everything outside of Ireland is superior.

☛ I know all about the honour of God, Mary Jane, but I think it's not at all honourable for the pope to turn out the women of the choirs that have slaved there all their lives and put little whipper-snappers of boys over their heads. I suppose it is for the good of the Church if the pope does it. But it's not just Mary Jane, and it's not right.

Related Characters: Kate Morkan (Aunt Kate) (speaker), Mary Jane

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 195

Explanation and Analysis

This is perhaps the text's most obvious commentary on the role of women. Aunt Kate is clearly opposed to the Catholic Church's decision to ban women from church choirs, but as a Catholic, she also feels unable to dispute the pope's infallibility. She concedes that it must be for the "good of the Church" since it was the pope who made the decision, but clearly feels passionately against this decision. This highlights the role of women in Dublin society. Aunt Kate is forced to accept this decision if she wants to continue following her religion, and thus must diminish her own views and even her willingness to voice them. She is forced to become a hypocrite, by a hypocritical society.

☛ Gabriel took his seat boldly at the head of the table and, having looked to the edge of the carver, plunged his fork firmly into the goose. He felt quite at ease now for he was an expert carver and liked nothing better than to find himself at the head of a well-laden table.

Related Characters: Gabriel Conroy

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 197



Explanation and Analysis

This moment also comes right after Miss Ivors leaves the party, presumably because she was upset by her interaction with Gabriel. Gabriel briefly wonders if she left because he had upset her, but then he is distracted when Aunt Kate asks him to come carve the goose. He is clearly more concerned with his own pride and is mostly oblivious to how his interactions with women affect them.

Gabriel's strong feelings of male pride and his need for female approval spring from his desire to fulfill a masculine roll, and from his aunts' (seemingly consistent) validation of this role. Aunt Kate seeks Gabriel out to carve the goose, and reciprocally, Gabriel feels powerful and validated by taking on this role. The seat at the head of the table is typically occupied by the patriarch, or the most masculine and powerful member of the party. Gabriel enjoys having this role, and this is where his need for female approval and acknowledgement of his masculinity comes from. His aunts reinforce his male pride by conforming to these typical gender roles and seeking out Gabriel to carve the goose.

Those days might, without exaggeration, be called spacious days: and if they are gone beyond recall let us hope, at least, that in gatherings such as this we shall still speak of them with pride and affection, still cherish in our hearts the memory of those dead and gone great ones whose fame the world will not willingly let die.

Related Characters: Gabriel Conroy (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 204

Explanation and Analysis

During Gabriel's speech, he addresses the past as well as the dead. As Gabriel talks, he idealizes the "spacious days" of the past. Gabriel takes a great deal of interest in the past, and seems to take on an especially nostalgic tone here. He idealizes the "dead and gone great ones" as well. In his realization at the end of the text, however, he comes to see that the "great ones" are mortal just like everyone else, and that everyone's life ends in death. Death is universal, and even those who accomplish great things die. However, the dead often have more influence on the lives of those living than other living people. Part of this power in death is because it is human nature to cling only to good memories after someone has died.

But yet, continued Gabriel, his voice falling into a softer inflection, there are always in gatherings such as this sadder thoughts that will recur to our minds: thoughts of the past, of youth, of changes, of absent faces that we miss here tonight. Our path through life is strewn with many such sad memories: and were we to brood upon them always we could not find the heart to go on bravely with our work among the living. ... Therefore, I will not linger on the past. I will not let any gloomy moralizing intrude upon us here tonight. Here we are gathered together for a brief moment from the bustle and rush of our everyday routine.

Related Characters: Gabriel Conroy (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 205

Explanation and Analysis

In the last part of Gabriel's dinnertime speech he chooses to focus on the sad memories of the past and how to deal with them. Essentially he says that dwelling on the sadness of loss and the past can impede our "work among the living." This rejection of the sadder aspects of the past, and of the loss of someone, is also a dangerous proposal. There is also great irony here, because shortly after, Gretta is distracted from the present merriment by the memory of her deceased first love.


Gabriel seems to relish the idea of an escape or a reprieve, whether it is from daily life and into the party, from the party and out into the snow, or from the present and back into the nostalgic past. He seems to be celebrating the present here, then—the "work among the living"—but really is conflating the cheerful reprieve of the party with the idea of tarrying with the happy past. Later, however, he seems to accept that one must accept both the happy and the sad aspects of the past, both the attributes and flaws of those who have died, instead of this nostalgic idealization of the past that he has proposed.

Section 3 Quotes

Their children, his writing, her household cares had not quenched their souls' tender fire. In one letter that he had written to her then he had said: Why is it that words like these seem to me so dull and cold? Is it because there is no word tender enough to be your name?

Related Characters: Gabriel Conroy, Gretta Conroy

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 214


Explanation and Analysis

Gabriel has this thought when he is experiencing a wave of nostalgia for the beginning of his relationship with Gretta. He rejects their current life together, which consists of “their children, his writing, her household cares” in favor of their early days together, which he remembers as being filled with passion. This passion is symbolized by “their souls’ tender fire,” which remains unsatisfied by their adult life.

The symbol of snow appears when Gabriel refers to his words as “cold.” He sees even words as dead, compared to the passion he felt for Gretta at the time when he wrote the letter. Gabriel’s sudden strong desire to return to this time in his life relates to his idealized view of the past, since it is later revealed that, though he has tender feelings for Gretta, it is not the true passion or love that one would be willing to die for.

☝ Was she annoyed, too, about something? If she would only turn to him or come to him of her own accord! To take her as she was would be brutal. No, he must see some ardour in her eyes first. He longed to be master of her strange mood.

Related Characters: Gabriel Conroy, Gretta Conroy

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 218

Explanation and Analysis

The fact that Gabriel wants to be the “master” of Gretta’s emotions comes largely from his inability to see her as an individual with feelings and experiences separate from his own. On a social level, this is because of their status as a married couple, wherein the wife is expected to generally adopt the husband’s identity and give up her individuality. This goes along with Gabriel’s sense of male pride, which is nurtured by his adherence to gender roles (and by his wife’s adherence as well). On a more personal level, Gabriel has been feeling affection and desire for Gretta and remembering the early days of their relationship—and he wants Gretta to be echoing these thoughts and feelings,

conforming to his expectations of the situation and their relationship in general.

☝ While he had been full of memories of their secret life together, full of tenderness and joy and desire, she had been comparing him in her mind with another...He saw himself as a ludicrous figure, acting as a pennyboy for his aunts, a nervous well-meaning sentimentalist, orating to vulgarians and idealizing his own clownish lusts...

Related Characters: Gabriel Conroy, Gretta Conroy

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 221

Explanation and Analysis

Gabriel’s pride is wounded when he learns that Gretta was thinking of someone else, and because he relies so much on female validation, he immediately begins to doubt himself in all ways. Suddenly the favors he did for his aunts make him a “pennyboy” doing their bidding, and all of his feelings seem trivialized, the tenderness he felt for Gretta earlier becoming nothing but “clownish lust.”

This is the closest Gabriel comes to recognizing his own idealization of the past and reliance on nostalgia. He becomes somewhat aware that he is a “sentimentalist,” and yet he is still not able to apply it to his own present situation.

☝ I think he died for me, she answered. A vague terror seized Gabriel at this answer as if, at that hour when he had hoped to triumph, some impalpable and vindictive being was coming against him, gathering forces against him in its vague world.

Related Characters: Gretta Conroy (speaker), Gabriel Conroy

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 221–222

Explanation and Analysis



Gretta’s statement that Michael Furey died “for” her is another manifestation of nostalgia. She feels guilty, and from this guilt and her glorified memories of her past love, she paints him as a martyr. Regardless of whether or not his

late night visit caused his death, Michael Furey did risk his life to see her again, and since he actually died, these two scenarios become equivalent. This not only highlights the power of nostalgia, but also the power of the dead. Michael Furey has taken a more prominent role in Gretta's life than many of the living. The fact that he died intensifies all of their previous experiences and her memories of them. Michael Furey gained influence through his death, and this is exactly why Gabriel fears him.

Gabriel feels jealous and threatened, even though these feelings are illogical, because his wife's love interest is now dead. Gabriel sees this deceased lover as an even greater threat, since Gabriel cannot give Gretta what Michael gave her – he does not feel passionately enough to die for her. Gabriel must let go of these feelings of jealousy and pride in order to see that he has missed out on a love as passionate as Michael's, and indeed this feeling of "vague terror" soon leads to his ultimate epiphany.

☞ One by one they were all becoming shades. Better pass boldly into that other world, in the glory of some passion than fade and wither dimly with age...He had never felt like that himself towards any woman but he knew that such a feeling must be love.

Related Characters: Gabriel Conroy

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 224

Explanation and Analysis


In actuality it is Gabriel's realization that death is universal that forces him to let go of his jealousy and pride and experience a rather dark epiphany. He realizes that he has never experienced a passion as powerful as Michael Furey had for his wife, and that he has lived a passionless life and will most likely die a passionless death.

He also realizes that death is universal, and that he too will die. He begins to see that he is on the track to "fade and whither dimly with age." He realizes that Michael Furey was lucky to experience a love worth dying for, even though he died young.

☞ The tears gathered more thickly in his eyes and in the partial darkness he imagined he saw the form of a young man standing under a dripping tree. Other forms were near. His soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead...His own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world: the solid world itself which these dead had one time reared and lived in was dissolving and dwindling.

Related Characters: Gabriel Conroy

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 224–225

Explanation and Analysis

Gabriel suddenly feels like he is very close to the world of the dead, now that he has had his realization about mortality. He imagines Michael Furey standing in the rain, and suddenly begins to realize how close he is to death. He also begins to realize that his empty life does not set him far apart from the inhabitants of the world of the dead. Gabriel feels close to the dead partly because he realizes he is not truly experiencing life, or what he imagines true life to be.

The symbol of darkness acts to indicate that Gabriel is approaching his epiphany, as he is only in "partial darkness," whereas before he was in often in almost complete darkness. The color grey is also used to describe the world of the dead, or the afterlife, adding to the sense of vagueness and universality that Gabriel associates with mortality.

☞ Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His 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.

Related Characters: Gabriel Conroy

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 225

Explanation and Analysis

At the last, Gabriel's epiphany ends up being less about love and more about death. He realizes the snow, which symbolizes mortality, is indiscriminate, just as death is universal. Everyone must die, regardless of who they are or what they accomplish in life. Furthermore, many of the dead characters in the text prove to be more important to the living characters than the other living people, and conversely, many of the living seem to be leading passionless lives like Gabriel's, as though living in a death-like state. The snow unites the living and the dead, then, as the narration expands away from Gabriel's point of view (which it has usually followed closely, as part of Joyce's technique of free indirect discourse) while Gabriel feels that

his own soul is "swooning" and expanding into the wider world.

This passage is the final paragraph of the story, and an ending that is famous for its loveliness. Part of this comes from the sudden widening of the point of view, as the narration leaves Gabriel's hotel room and touches upon various parts of Ireland, ending with the grave of Michael Furey. The final sentence also achieves its effect through consonance (the recurrence of similar sounds, especially consonants—in this case the f's and s's of "falling," "faintly," "soul swooned slowly," and "snow"), repetition, and "chiasmus" (repetition combined with inversion, as when "falling faintly" reoccurs as "faintly falling"). The subtle use of these literary devices allows Joyce to emphasize the closing mood of his story, and invite the reader to slip into Gabriel's sense of epiphany.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

SECTION 1

The story opens in the midst of Kate and Julia Morkan's annual Christmas party, with the caretaker's daughter Lily taking the male party guest's coats, while Julia and Kate attend to the women's coats. The two have been hosting the party for many years and are joined by their only niece Mary Jane, who moved in with them after her father's death thirty years ago. All three women are very musical: Mary Jane plays the organ at Haddington Road; Julia, though she is "quite **grey**," is the leading soprano in a church; and Kate gives music lessons from home.

Kate and Julia are starting to wonder where their nephew Gabriel is, as it is already after ten o'clock and he is not usually late. They are also waiting on Freddy Malins, who often arrives late and drunk. When Gabriel finally arrives, along with his wife Gretta, Lily takes his coat, which is covered with **snow** from outside. Lily asks if it is snowing, and Gabriel confirms, suddenly noticing that Lily has matured into a woman since the last time he saw her. He asks if she has finished school yet, and then comments that they will probably be attending her wedding soon. Lily unexpectedly snaps back with bitterness about men her age. Gabriel is immediately hurt by her sharp reaction to what he intended as a compliment. He hastily hands her a tip, insisting that she take it in the spirit of Christmas, and hurries to the stairs, still shaken by the exchange.

Gabriel begins to think of the speech he is to give that night, questioning his choice to quote Robert Browning, an English writer, whom he fears might be too sophisticated and obscure for his audience. Gabriel hears the men's heavy footsteps above as they dance and is reminded that his audience is less cultured than he is. He worries that it will appear he is flaunting his superior education, and he begins to worry that his entire speech is a failure.

The theme of death begins to appear subtly even in the story's opening descriptions, as Mary Jane's father represents an initial mention of "the dead." Additionally, the color grey is used in the physical description of Aunt Julia to symbolize her old age and proximity to death. Joyce also introduces the motif of music here. This is a musical family, and music will play an important role throughout the story.



As Gabriel enters the party he is covered in snow. Taken in light of the story's final image, this is perhaps meant to hint at the idea of mortality, and emphasize the fact that Gabriel is mortal like everyone else. His interaction with Lily then shows how much his pride depends on his interactions with women, since her bitter response to his question (which seems entirely based in her own unhappy experiences, and not a reflection on Gabriel himself) puts him in a sullen mood for the beginning of the party. This reinforces the fact that, since Lily is a woman in society, Gabriel expects her to politely respond to his question, and he doesn't even consider why she might have responded in the way she did.



Gabriel's pride is so wounded from his interaction with Lily that he is beginning to question his entire speech. He clearly feels superior to his peers because he believes Dublin and its inhabitants are somewhat provincial or culturally backwards. He imagines his audience won't be able to understand a complicated English poet, and will resent him for flaunting the fact that he is more cultured than they are.



Julia, Kate, and Gretta interrupt Gabriel's thoughts as they exit the dressing room. Aunt Julia's face and hair are **grey**, and Gabriel notices that her slow, confused nature gives her the appearance of someone who doesn't know where she is or where she is going. Aunt Kate looks a bit healthier. The women greet Gabriel, who is their favorite nephew, and begin talking with him and his wife. Aunt Kate asks about their decision to spend the night in a hotel rather than taking a cab home, and Gabriel explains that Gretta got a cold from the cab ride last time, and then adds jokingly that she would willingly walk home in the **snow**. Gretta and his aunts tease Gabriel about his choice to wear galoshes, and Gabriel becomes defensive, explaining that they're popular on the "continent."

Gabriel and Gretta's conversation with Julia and Kate is interrupted by the arrival of Freddy Malins. Aunt Kate asks Gabriel to go keep an eye on Freddy and not to let him upstairs if he is drunk. As Gabriel heads downstairs to Freddy, Kate offers drinks to Miss Daly and Miss Power. Mr. Browne, another guest, leads them, along with Miss Furlong, into the back room for drinks as Kate disappears. Mr. Browne proceeds to flirt with the women, who politely indulge him at first but eventually lose interest. Kate and another party guest enter the room and announce that it's time to pair up for the next waltz. Gabriel escorts Freddy Malins upstairs to join the party. Gabriel assures Aunt Kate that Freddy is not noticeably drunk, although his behavior suggests otherwise.

SECTION 2

Gabriel has trouble paying attention to Mary Jane's piano piece, and as his gaze wanders he notices a picture of the balcony scene from [Romeo and Juliet](#) hanging next to a picture made by Aunt Julia of the two princes who were murdered in the Tower of London. This reminds Gabriel of his mother, who had learned to embroider similar things while in school with Aunt Julia. Gabriel thinks it strange that his mother did not share the same musical talent as her sisters, but instead was lauded for her brains. There is a photograph of her with her other son, who she had named Constantine in keeping with her decision to name her sons in honor of the "dignity of family life." Gabriel attributes his and Constantine's accomplishments to his mother, but resents his mother's lack of respect for Gretta. Gabriel lets his hostility go as Mary Jane ends her performance.

Aunt Julia's "grey" appearance is mentioned again, perhaps foreshadowing the scene where Gabriel imagines her funeral. Gretta teases Gabriel about his galoshes, and this seems to bother him even though he tries to hide it—he clearly takes himself quite seriously. His preference for galoshes springs from his belief that everything from the "continent" (continental Europe) is superior to Ireland and Dublin. He defends his decision by saying that galoshes are popular on the continent, but neither his aunts nor Gretta seem to understand this reasoning.



Gabriel's aunts reaffirm his role as the man in charge by asking him to look after Freddy Malins, who himself appears as a potential wild card in the otherwise polite and rather formal atmosphere. Mr. Browne, whose name is later used to reference the color brown and represent the dullness of Dublin, proceeds to act like a stereotypically entitled man, making an effort to flirt with the women at the party until they grow bored. Mr. Browne represents everything Gabriel dislikes about Dublin – he is ignorant and simple, but also overconfident. He repeats the same dull jokes throughout the night and talks a lot without saying anything valuable. The women, for their part, are expected to indulge Browne politely rather than directly rejecting his advances.



Gabriel's mother represents another influential deceased character. Gabriel attributes his accomplishments to his mother and remembers how strongly she valued family life and had high expectations for her sons. Gabriel also briefly reflects on his mother's lack of respect for Gretta, and while this genuinely upsets him, he lets his bitter feelings go. Rather than dwelling on the negative experiences he had with his mother, Gabriel chooses to bask in the positive ones. This is often the impulse of the characters in the text, who have glorified memories of their dead loved ones. This early reference to the "balcony scene" from [Romeo and Juliet](#) foreshadows Gretta's later memories of Michael Furey.



Gabriel finds himself paired up with his colleague, Miss Ivors, for the next dance. She is a talkative young woman with striking **brown** eyes. She is wearing an Irish symbol on her collar. As they begin dancing she announces that she has something to discuss with Gabriel, and reveals that she has seen his column in “The Daily Express,” a known anti-Nationalist publication. Miss Ivors scolds Gabriel, calling him a “West Briton.”

Gabriel's pride is wounded by yet another negative interaction with a woman. Instead of conforming to her role as a polite woman and avoiding conflict, Miss Ivors brings up a touchy subject with Gabriel and provokes him. He resents her audacity and is especially embarrassed since she is a woman and she is criticizing his political views in front of the other party guests. Miss Ivors' brown eyes perhaps reflect her connection to Ireland and Dublin, and the name she teases Gabriel with—“West Briton”—refers to an Irishman who sympathizes more with England than his own country.



Miss Ivors then changes to a friendlier tone, and asks Gabriel to come on a trip to the Aran Isles in the coming summer. He declines, as he already has plans to go on a cycling tour somewhere on the continent. Miss Ivors asks why he is not interested in exploring his own country, and Gabriel responds harshly, saying he is sick of his own country. He remains agitated even after their conversation ends, believing that Miss Ivors intentionally humiliated him in front of the other guests.

Miss Ivors continues to agitate Gabriel by questioning his desire to travel outside of Ireland. Gabriel, who seems to be outwardly in denial of his distaste for Dublin, is finally pushed to admitting he is sick of Ireland. Gabriel takes this interaction with Miss Ivors as a personal attack, rather than what was perhaps simply her attempt to make a political statement.



Gretta joins Gabriel after the dance, and when he says Miss Ivors invited them both on a trip to western Ireland, his wife becomes disappointed that he declined such an offer. Gretta leaves to go socialize and Gabriel's attention turns toward the **window**, where he can see that the **snow** has covered everything outside. He imagines how pleasant a solitary walk along the river and through the park would be, and how the snow will look coating the branches and the top of the Wellington Monument. He imagines it is more pleasant outside than it will be at the supper table. Gabriel's mind drifts back to the speech he is to give and he decides to make a subtle comment to offend Miss Ivors as an act of revenge.

Gabriel's pride is still wounded after his embarrassing interaction with Miss Ivors, and he snaps at his wife when she expresses enthusiasm about joining Miss Ivors on the trip to Western Ireland. Gabriel's admiration of the snow falling outside serves as a reminder of the larger world outside the insulated party—a world where the snow, like mortality, falls silently on everyone and everything. Gabriel sees the beauty in this as he looks through the window, which acts as a kind of porous barrier between the worlds of the living and the dead. In a way, he seems to already envy the dead, or at least longs for the peace that would come with escaping the awkward and frustrating interactions he's had at the party thus far. Yet even as he contemplates this larger space outside, Gabriel still cannot escape himself, and he feels a petty and selfish desire to have “revenge” on Miss Ivors for her perceived slight against him.



Aunt Julia enters the room and begins to sing “Arrayed for the Bridal.” Freddy seems particularly moved by Julia’s performance, and Mr. Browne refers to her proudly, as though she is his prodigy. However the mood quickly changes when Mary Jane makes a comment about singing for the honor of God and Aunt Kate snaps, bringing up the Catholic Church’s recent decision to ban women from the choirs. Kate concedes that if the pope made the decision, it must be for the good of the Church, but does not really seem to be convinced of this. Mary Jane tries to ease the tension by pointing out that Mr. Browne is Protestant and the conversation may be making him uncomfortable. Aunt Kate backtracks, calling herself a “stupid old woman” and reasserting the pope’s infallibility. Mary Jane interrupts and suggests they all go to dinner.

Though Aunt Julia is elsewhere described as old, confused, and nearing death, she still has an interior richness and vivacity in the form of her music (though Mr. Browne also seems to want to take credit for her talent). In response to this moving performance, then, Aunt Kate’s passionate denouncement of the Church’s decision to ban women from choirs draws the conversation back into the political sphere, calling attention to women’s role in Catholicism. As the Catholic Church plays a significant role in Dublin society, the fact that women are excluded in such a large way from the Church is almost as if they are being excluded from society itself. Aunt Kate clearly feels torn between her loyalty to her religion (which holds that the pope’s decisions must be infallible, and thus shouldn’t be questioned) and her belief that talented women deserve a place in the choir. While she does voice her opinion, she ultimately degrades herself and dismisses her previous statements so as to avoid making a fuss. Mary Jane too would seemingly rather silence or distract from her aunt’s opinions rather than make a man (Mr. Browne) uncomfortable.



On the way to the dining room, Gabriel sees Miss Ivors putting on her coat to leave. Gretta and Mary Jane are trying to convince her to stay, and since she continues to insist on leaving, Gabriel offers to walk her home. But Miss Ivors laughs and leaves in a hurry before they can protest any more. Gabriel wonders if he caused her hasty departure but soon dismisses the notion. Aunt Kate enters looking for Gabriel, as it is time to carve the goose. Gabriel feels like he is in his element at the head of the table, which is set with a decadent feast.

Gabriel’s pride prevents him from seeing how his interactions with women affect the women themselves. Miss Ivors, who has perhaps been upset by Gabriel, merely laughs and leaves rather than causing more of a fuss—stepping back into her role as a polite woman. While Gabriel briefly wonders if he is the reason Miss Ivors is leaving the party early, he gladly abandons the idea when Aunt Kate asks him to carve the goose. Aunt Kate is reaffirming Gabriel’s masculinity by assigning him the patriarchal seat at the head of the table.



After everyone has been served, Gabriel sits down to eat, but does not participate in the conversation. The guests are discussing the opera, and Mr. Browne begins to talk of earlier times when there were more talented singers in Dublin. Mr. Bartell D’Arcy counters that there are still talented singers, but they are probably in London, Paris, or Milan. The pudding that Aunt Julia has prepared is served, and she remarks that it is “not quite **brown** enough.” Mr. Browne makes a joke about being “all brown.”

Mr. Browne’s nostalgic attitude towards the earlier days of the opera reinforces the romantic view of the past that almost everyone in the story seems to adopt. The other party guests confirm that Dublin is perhaps not the most desirable place for talented people to live. Aunt Julia’s brown pudding and Mr. Browne’s name are emphasized here, perhaps referencing the color’s symbolism of dullness and Dublin life.



Gabriel is the only man who does not eat the pudding, as he does not like sweets, and prefers instead to munch on celery. Mrs. Malins announces that in a week her son is going to visit a monastery at Mount Melleray, which provides care for alcoholics at no charge, and explains that most people give a donation when they leave. Mr. Browne is shocked to learn that monks take a vow of silence, get up at two in the morning, and sleep in their coffins.

Gabriel’s refusal to eat the brown pudding might represent his distaste for Dublin life and refusal to actively participate in it. The fact that all of the other men eat the pudding indicates that they do not have the same discontentment with Dublin that Gabriel has. The monks, who sleep in coffins and take a vow of silence, represent a way of life that is very close to death—a purposeful mingling of the living and the dead.



Dessert is passed around and drinks are poured in preparation for Gabriel's speech. In his speech he praises his aunts (calling Kate, Julia, and Mary Jane the "Three Graces") and recognizes their hospitality, attributing it to an Irish virtue disappearing with the new generation. He thinks of the fact that Miss Ivors left "discourteously" and feels a surge of confidence knowing that he "won." Gabriel mourns the replacement of this former generation with the new, misdirected generation. He stresses the importance of remembering the virtues of the dead and not dwelling on the negative aspects of the past. The speech ends with a toast as his aunts beam with pride, and Mr. Browne leads the guests in singing "For he's a jolly good fellow," Freddy singing with a bit too much drunken enthusiasm.

Gabriel gets a surge of confidence remembering that Miss Ivors left the party early, and he realizes that even though she embarrassed him, he feels that he "won" their argument since she was upset enough to leave. The fact that this gives Gabriel confidence is an affirmation of his need for women to be subordinate for him to nurture his pride. His speech addresses the past, and he emphasizes the need to remember the good times and the lost loved ones during social gatherings. Gabriel and many of the party guests view the past through a nostalgic lens, and this often distracts them from or gives them a negative view of the present.



SECTION 3

The guests are gathered in the hall preparing to leave, and Aunt Kate requests that someone close the door so that Mrs. Malins does not catch a **cold** and die. Mary Jane explains that the door was open because Mr. Browne is outside, and Aunt Kate jokes, "**Browne** is everywhere." They joke that Mr. Browne is all too available and none too useful. As Gabriel waits for Gretta to get her coat, Mary Jane remarks once again how cold the men look, and Gabriel tells a story about his grandfather Patrick Morkan's horse, Johnny. His grandfather was a glue-boiler, and once he took his horse out and Johnny started to walk in circles around King Billy's statue, as though he were back in the mill or perhaps in love with the statue of the horse King Billy was riding. Freddy Malins and his wife leave with Mr. Browne in a cab.

The continual mention of the cold once again draws attention to death, which awaits all of the party guests just as the cold awaits them outside. Aunt Kate's joke about Mr. Browne reiterates Gabriel's feelings that Dublin is dull, simple, and commonplace—and yet he continues to live there and seems to have no intention of ever leaving (except for an occasional vacation). All of these examples serve to illustrate the fact that Gabriel's life is generally empty and passionless. Much like his grandfather's horse, Gabriel feels he is going in circles, stuck in Dublin, getting nowhere—even if he isn't yet ready to admit this to himself.



Gabriel stands in a **dark** part of the hall, gazing up the staircase at a woman in the shadows. He realizes the woman is Gretta, leaning on the banister and listening to piano music coming from above. The others come inside from seeing off Freddy, and Mrs. Malins, and Mr. Browne, and they join Gabriel observing the scene. The song seems to be an old Irish air, and Mary Jane recognizes the voice as that of Mr. Bartell D'Arcy. He then abruptly stops singing and comes downstairs with Gretta and Miss O'Callaghan. Aunt Julia and Miss O'Callaghan remark that they both love how the **snow** looks, but Aunt Kate adds that Mr. D'Arcy doesn't like the snow. Gabriel watches his wife, who seems distracted from the conversation, and notices how the light illuminates her hair. Gretta asks Mr. D'Arcy the name of the song, and then everyone says goodnight.

This passage begins the closing scene of the story, as the party ends and Gabriel is left alone with Gretta. His inability to recognize his own wife as she stands in the shadows looking wistful sets in motion the idea of a fundamental disconnection between Gabriel and Gretta, even if in this moment the disconnection seems romantic. Gabriel is enthralled by seeing Gretta in this "new light," but only because it makes her seem no longer familiar to him, but rather foreign and "other." Yet he doesn't consider just why she might be so distracted by hearing this song—that she might have her own nostalgic associations with it, entirely independent of Gabriel or their relationship.



It is early in the morning but still **dark**, with a dull light coming up over the houses and the river. Gabriel watches Gretta walking next to Mr. D'Arcy and feels sudden tenderness towards her. He begins reflecting back on their early memories together, such as when they stood outside in the **cold** watching a man making bottles in a furnace. Gabriel wishes to forget their dull present together and go back to moments of their life together "like the tender fires of stars." The group catches a cab together and rides mostly in silence, as Gabriel continues to remember the beginning of his relationship with Gretta.

Gabriel's romanticized memories of the beginning of his relationship with Gretta distract him from their disconnection in the present. Gabriel's memory of them watching the man making bottles in the furnace represents their glimpse of passion in the early stages of their relationship. However, the fact that they are still outside in the cold even in the memory represents that they never had true passion like Michael Furey felt for Gretta. Gabriel waxes poetic as he enjoys a rush of tenderness for his wife, seemingly inspired by seeing her briefly as her own woman, someone wholly unfamiliar to him.



Gretta and Gabriel get out of the cab, and as she leans on him for support he is struck with an overwhelming desire for her. They approach the hotel door and Gabriel almost feels like they are escaping from their dull, everyday lives. The porter lights a candle and leads them to their room. The porter apologizes for a malfunctioning electric **light** but Gabriel insists that they have enough light from the street, and indeed a "ghostly light" from the window fills the room. Gabriel looks out the **window** and tries to subdue his feelings of lust. He can tell that Gretta is preoccupied with something, and he longs to be "master" of her mood.

Gabriel's sudden feelings of lust for Gretta are inextricably connected to his desire to fulfill a masculine role and control her. He is thinking of her with great affection, but there is a possessiveness inherent to that affection—he wants her to be thinking of him too, and thus to be "master of her mood." Gabriel continues to feel a sense of nostalgia and excitement, as if something about this night offers an escape from the dullness of his usual life. In wanting to keep the lighting dim, Gabriel is perhaps trying to prolong the feeling he had watching Gretta on the staircase—observing their relationship in a romantic dimness that obscures harsh realities and banal familiarities. Yet this dimness also obscures the truth of the disconnection between Gabriel and Gretta, as she is "preoccupied" with something wholly separate from Gabriel.



While Gabriel is recounting an unremarkable story, Gretta suddenly kisses him tenderly on the lips. Gabriel feels a rush of confidence, hoping that perhaps she has been feeling the same desire he has. Gabriel asks her what she is thinking about, and is caught off guard when Gretta bursts into tears and confesses she was thinking of the song she heard earlier. Gretta confesses that the song reminds her of her childhood love, Michael Furey, and Gabriel is immediately filled with rage.

Gabriel's confidence is directly affected by how much affection Gretta displays. In this climactic turn, Gretta finally expresses her own inner life, and her thoughts are entirely different from what Gabriel expected them to be. It's telling, then, that his response to this is anger and jealousy—his affection and desire for Gretta depended on her affirmation and reciprocation, and when he discovers that she is thinking of someone else altogether, these tender feelings evaporate. Gretta, meanwhile, has similarly allowed herself to be distracted from the present by her nostalgic feelings for her past lover.



Gabriel asks if Gretta wanted to go to Galway with Miss Ivors in order to visit this boy, and Gretta, confused, responds that he is dead. She tells Gabriel he was employed in the gasworks, as Gabriel continues to sarcastically ask questions about him. Gabriel worries that his wife has been comparing him to this former lover, while he has been thinking only of her.

Gabriel is continuing to react purely based on his wounded pride and jealousy. Even though Michael Furey is dead, Gabriel still sees him as a threat and an obstacle to his desire to be the "master" of his wife's "mood." These feelings prevent him from empathizing with Gretta, as Gabriel continues to see his wife only in the context of her relationship to him.



Gabriel is seized with terror when Gretta tells him that the boy, Michael Furey, died for his love for *her*. Michael was already ill, but Gretta believes his condition worsened after he went outside in the rain to visit her before she left for a convent. Overcome with emotion, Gretta falls asleep, but Gabriel stays awake watching her. He realizes that she has already experienced a love much greater than theirs, and that he has, in fact, played a very small role in her life in comparison to that of Michael Furey.

Gabriel continues to watch Gretta, and sees her as though for the first time. He thinks about how soon he may be sitting in the same house where he was tonight, mourning Aunt Julia's death. This rumination on death leads him to realize that he will die without ever experiencing true passion as Michael Furey had. Gabriel realizes he has never experienced love that he would die for, and he is filled with sadness.

Gabriel suddenly feels very close to the world of the dead, and feels his own identity fading into this “grey impalpable world.” He hears **snow** falling against the **windowpane** and turns to see “silver and dark” snowflakes contrasting with the **lamplight**. He realizes that snow is falling all over Ireland, even over the “crooked crosses and headstones” in the cemetery. The snow is falling indiscriminately, covering both the living and the dead.

Gretta views her relationship with Michael Furey through a nostalgic lens and turns him into a romantic martyr, regardless of whether or not his late-night visit actually caused his death. Gabriel's epiphany—the story's climax—begins with this transformation of his feelings, as his angry jealousy turns to terror and then a kind of self-effacing sadness. As his jealousy disappears, Gabriel is finally moved to see Gretta as her own person, with her own inner life and past passions that have nothing to do with him. This unique kind of sadness—Gabriel's realization that he could be thinking nostalgically of their past relationship while Gretta was thinking nostalgically of her past relationship with another—speaks to a fundamental disconnection between all people, no matter how close or familiar they seem, and is a crucial aspect of the complex epiphany that closes the story.



It's important to note that once Gabriel's thoughts grow more expansive and selfless—as he sheds his jealousy and pride and considers Gretta as her own mysterious, independent, unknowable person—his thoughts almost immediately turn to death. Joyce shows this very subtly, as Gabriel is also thinking about the party and his aunts in connection to the night's revelations about Gretta, but this next becomes a realization that Aunt Julia will probably die soon, which then brings Gabriel to terms with his own mortality. Gabriel believes now that Michael Furey (and perhaps Gretta as well) experienced a love worth dying for, which is something Gabriel has never had. In this moment Gabriel feels that his long, comfortable life has been devoid of true passion or human connection, and thus is meaningless compared to a short life with an experience of such passion and connection.



The narration expands with Gabriel's thoughts, leaving his narrow perception (which the third-person narrator generally follows, as part of Joyce's method of free indirect discourse) and widening to the snowy expanses outside, and even to all of Ireland, as Gabriel's epiphany brings him a moment of selflessness and truth. Gabriel realizes that the living and the dead are always intimately bound to each other, and that his own passionless life can barely be defined as “living”—yet in this moment he observes this fact only with a kind of dispassionate sadness. In his epiphany he feels that he suddenly understands the dead and their ceaseless presence among the living, and this brings on his visions of their “grey impalpable world.” In the story's famous and lovely ending, then, the indiscriminately falling snow symbolically unifies the living and the dead in one final image.





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