



FACULTAD DE
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GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

**Irishness and Aesthetics in James Joyce's
“The Dead” and John Huston's
Interpretation in the Homonymous Film**

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Abstract

The aim of this dissertation is to offer an approach to James Joyce's "The Dead" and his particular view of Ireland for it is the best and perhaps the first exemplification of the various features that he will explore in future works. It seems closer to *A Portrait* than to the rest of *Dubliners'* short stories and represents a step forward in Joyce's literary creation. Having, also, an important witness from an authoritative voice, I will take into consideration John Huston's homonymous film in order to establish a comparison or to show how a notable film director visualizes or understands Joyce's universe and how he transforms abstract ideas taken from the text into emblematical images on screen.

Key words: James Joyce, "The Dead", Ireland, Dublin, Religion, John Huston, stream of consciousness.

Resumen

Este Trabajo Fin de Grado tiene como finalidad ofrecer un acercamiento al relato joyceano "The Dead", así como su particular visión de Irlanda reflejada en el mismo. He escogido esta obra porque, en mi opinión, es una de las que mejor, y quizás por primera vez, presenta las diversas características que marcarán su obra futura. Más cercano a *Portrait* que al resto de historias de *Dubliners*, este relato supone un paso decisivo en la creación literaria de Joyce. Usando como referencia el importante testimonio de una voz autorizada, voy a tener también en cuenta la película homónima de John Huston para tratar de establecer una comparación o mostrar cómo un notable director visualiza o interpreta el universo de James Joyce y transforma las ideas abstractas del texto en imágenes cinematográficas de una gran plasticidad.

Palabras clave: James Joyce, "The Dead", Irlanda, Dublín, religión, John Huston, monólogo interior.

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Introduction

James Joyce (1882–1941) was a recognized and admired Irish novelist, well known for his best and most popular novel, *Ulysses*. He brought his unique narrative technique to a higher degree, creating a new and innovative style, which was different from the old, preconceived patterns. That was the key for his success. Almost all of his works share a common outline: he employed a rare and innovative technique called “stream of consciousness,” and all of his literary creations were particularly influenced by his Irish roots—Ireland and Dublin would always play an important role in his stories.

The aforementioned characteristics made him a universal literary figure, and are masterfully expressed in Leopold Bloom’s story though, these innovations were put into practice some years earlier. We could establish the birth of this narrative world in his first approach to prose, his short-story collection, *Dubliners*. According to Joseph K. Davis, “these short stories contain or anticipate artistic problems and themes with which Joyce concerned himself throughout his career” (79). In a way, *Dubliners* seems to be a primary step in the creation of his unique style and acts as a driving force for his future aesthetic considerations. More concretely, the last story of this collection, “The Dead¹”, entails even a step further in his search for a genuine style. In spite of the fact that the whole compendium shares a common pattern using Ireland and Dublin as real characters, in this last story at the very end, he introduces his most significant feature: the stream of consciousness. At the end of the story, Gabriel’s interior monologue echoes Leopold Bloom’s forefathers in *Ulysses*. “The Dead,” therefore, exemplifies the best paradigm for an immersion into Joyce’s universe. As John V. Kelleher points out: “We may... safely reckon that “The Dead,” as completed, comes out of the same period of gestation and is

¹ To avoid misunderstanding, when I refer to the joycean text, it will appear quoted (“The Dead”), and when referred to the film, it will be shown in italics (*The Dead*). In the quotations references, however, the names of the authors (Joyce & Huston) will appear instead of the titles.

much closer in technique to *The Portrait* than to the earlier stories in *Dubliners*.” (Kelleher 415) For this reason, a study of “The Dead” would be a very interesting subject for my dissertation especially if we add a new dimension to it.

Cinema and literature have become, in a way, interdisciplinary arts; therefore, I consider mandatory to analyse, or at least take into consideration, a filmic adaptation because, paraphrasing Jolanta Wawrzycka, all of us have a visualization of literary works (67). Adaptations are visualizations from authoritative voices. As she explains, we can coincide or not with the director (67) but when one of the greatest filmmakers of all time hints at something we should take notice: no doubt that John Huston’s adaptation, *The Dead* (1987), should be taken as an authoritative approach to Joyce’s universe and will help to better understand his narrative technique and his literary world. Both director and writer share some features and both are well-considered in their respective artistic fields. Huston was a great designer, with a particular vision and very closed to Ireland too, and as a result, his interpretation of James Joyce should be taken into consideration.

1. Ireland and Dublin in “The Dead”

Ireland has always been an important element in the construction of James Joyce’s universe. He left Ireland in 1902 and lived a self-imposed exile in the continent for almost forty years till his death in Zurich in 1941. Despite the fact that he left the island when he was only twenty years old, he was too close to his roots so he constantly mentions Ireland in his works. As Joseph K. David explains, “Despite his exile in the great cities of the continent, Joyce always places his literary works in the capital city of Dublin” (79). *Dubliners* exemplifies this fascination at its best.

Dublin is the framework where the stories from *Dubliners* take place but it is also a character in itself. In the last short story, the ones that concerns me, Dublin and Irish

problems are part of it. They are not just the environment in which Joyce sets the plot; the city and the country are part of it. As Gillespie explains, “Irishness stands as a central feature of ‘The Dead’ ” (149). There are a countless examples of elements related to the shamrock country. First of all, the characters are a group of Irish aristocrats that represent a deliberate selection of Irish representative people. This idea is well expressed in John Huston’s movie. The casting serves as an example because he selects for his project a group of well-known Irish actors, such as Donald McCann, Dan O’Herlihy, and Cathleen Delany (Gillespie 149). They are in a pleasant house at the Morkan’s annual Christmas party and, from their interactive comments and shrugs, we can infer a great deal of their personal characteristics. Joyce provides a lot of clues that conforms his approach to Ireland and its people.

The protagonist, Gabriel Conroy is a columnist writer who does not feel very close to Ireland, or at least he feels that it is not the most important reference for him. In other words, he is not an enthusiastic nationalist. His very name hints at this characteristically joycean Irishness. As Kelleher remarks, Lily the caretaker’s daughter called him Mr. Connery instead Mr. Conroy. Conroy derives from the Irish name Cú Roí and by introducing a vowel in his name, maybe due to her lower class education, she changes the Irish meaning of Gabriel’s surname (419). This is a minor clue but it proves Irish significant features in Joyce’s text.

There is an important approach to Irish context in Miss Ivors and Gabriel dancing. She inquires him about his condition, and in a sarcastic and ironic tone, she accuses Gabriel of being a West Briton, because he reviews books for the *Unionist Daily Express*. She also invites him to go to Aran Islands², a proposition rejected by Gabriel because he spends his holidays cycling in France and Belgium (Joyce 232). As Kelleher remarks,

² At the time of *Dubliners* publication, Lady Gregory, W. B. Yeats and J. M. Synge among others have managed to convert the Aran Islands in one of the most important references of gaelic culture in Ireland.

“For him, obviously, the west of Ireland is only the fag end of a dead country” (425). This part shows a vision of Irishness that Gabriel is not concerned with and, also, it shows an approach to Irishness in Joyce’s work. As Gabriel said to Miss Ivors, “ ‘O, to tell you the truth’, retorted Gabriel suddenly, ‘I’m sick of my own country, sick of it!’ ” (Joyce 235).

Related to this idea, and trying to clarify this relationship, Mr. Browne is another important character in the story. In this case, he is even more important as a symbol rather than for his role in the story plot. He is the only Protestant character in the story. Maybe Freddy Malins could be non-catholic, but we do not have enough elements to prove it. There are a lot of references to religion and to Mr. Browne condition, for example, in the after-dinner conversation they remark:

"And do you mean to say", asked Mr. Browne incredulously, "that a chap can go down there and put up there as if it were a hotel and live on the fat of the land and then come away without paying anything?"
"O, most people give some donation to the monastery when they leave." said Mary Jane.
"I wish we had an institution like that in our Church," said Mr. Browne candidly.
(Joyce 249)

In this respect, religion has always been a controversial issue. Protestantism was associated with England in the same way that the Irish were linked to Catholicism. Religion was, in fact, a type of self-determination. This idea is related to what I stated before when Miss Ivors called Gabriel “West Briton”. Religion and self-determination co-occur in Irish tradition and it could be one of the triggers that led Michael Collins and other Irishmen to fight for independence using violent methods. It could be a trigger or an excuse. Religious wars usually hide other controversial matters. In this case, Irish people are chiefly Catholic and religion has a lot of influence, so it has been a point of contention for years. James Joyce gets first-hand knowledge of this, because he belonged to a catholic family and was educated by the Jesuits. These features marked his personality and despite his anticlericalism, religious debates and spiritual concerns played

a key role in his texts. Religion was an important part in Irish consciousness and Joyce's approach to it seems to have been a mandatory issue.

The last significant component that I would mention related to Irishness in Joyce's text is symbolism. There are various emblematic Irish symbols clearly recognisable in the story with hints and clues that enfold Irish consciousness that are also well preserved and superbly expressed in Huston's film. For example, the cabman in the film appears to be a non-Dubliner who is working for a relative. He doesn't know the city very well and that's the reason for his misunderstanding, while in the text his confusion is provoked by Mr Browne and Freddy Malins, because they indicated two different places to him. Huston emphasizes and magnifies this idea, insisting on the importance of Dublin; Gabriel asks him if he is not a Dubliner and if he is from the West of Ireland. He replies that he is from Aran Islands (Huston). This detail has a significant symbolic meaning and shares the same obvious purpose as in Joyce's original. He also mentions the Trinity College, O'Donnell Bridge etc., trying to emphasize the idea that they are, indeed, in Dublin, not in some other place.

2. An analyses of "The Dead"/*The Dead*: Joyce and Huston

As I outlined before, Irishness is an important element in James Joyce's literary creation, but there is another significant issue in his aesthetic conception of literature introduced, in a way, in *The Dead*, and an analysis of this point is another mandatory question. In this respect, an approach to Huston's visualization of some passages of the text would be very interesting. There are some essential moments in the construction of the plot and the story. Joyce's story has a clear and concise structure. First of all, the most important part is the last one, Gabriel's vision at the hotel room. The previous part, the rest of the tale, seems to be the explanation for this final conclusion, or in other words, it

paves the way for the ending. The entire story leads the reader to this ultimate climax. As

C.C. Loomis, Jr. remarks:

These sections become shorter as the story progresses. The effect of this constant shortening of scenes, together with a constant speeding up in the narrative line, is an almost constant increase of pace. Within each of the sections, Joyce carefully builds up to a climax, then slackens the pace slightly at the beginning of the next section as he begins to build up to a new climax. The pace in the sections is progressively more rapid, however, partially because of the cumulative effect of the narrative. As the story progresses, more things happen in less time. (149)

The discourse in this respect is really meaningful and Gabriel felt humiliated for his behaviour: “He saw himself as a ludicrous figure, acting as a pennyboy for his aunts” (Joyce 273). He spends the whole party trying to please his aunts and at the end he assumes that his conduct was irresponsible. There is a significant moment at the dinner when Gabriel is pronouncing his speech and he refers to his aunts as “The Three Graces of the Dublin musical world” (Joyce 253). The Three Graces were Zeus’ daughters and were the symbol of good manners and hospitality. This part of the story is brilliantly portrayed in John Huston’s film. The camera, taking the leadership role, focuses on the aunts and records their perspective. In this scene, we perceive the guests looking at us (the aunts), then the camera changes perspective and we see the aunts with a feeling of extreme happiness. They don’t understand that it is just an artificial show. Related to this, he emphasizes the idea of hospitality, feasting his aunts with his comments: “Ladies and Gentlemen, it is not the first time that we have gathered together under this hospitable roof, around this hospitable board. It is not the first time that we have been the recipients –or perhaps, I had better say, the victims- of the hospitality of certain good ladies.” (Joyce 251). The word “hospitality” appears three times in a short extract. This is the key to the Christmas party and reveals the absurd behaviour of Gabriel and all the people in the party.

Related to this, Gabriel is aware of his pathetic behaviour at the party only after Gretta's revelation, which is probably the most important feature in the story. It is the trigger to Gabriel's epiphany. As Silvana Caporaletti shows in her study, "In 'The Dead', Gretta's painful recollection of her dead lover is the catalytic agent of Gabriel's regenerating epiphany, a moment of insight that allows him a mysteriously synchronic vision of his own past and present." (410). There is a critical point that awakes Gretta's emotions and feelings. It is the staircase scene. She is listening to Bartell D'Arcy song "The Lass of Aughrim," a melody that brings her memories back to Galway and her sweetheart, Michael Fury, now dead. This scene is differently portrayed in Joyce's text and Huston's film. He masterfully uses the presence of his daughter, Anjelica Huston, on the scene. A long shot of her listening up in the stairs combined with Gabriel's looking up to her. It is not completely consistent with Joyce's text. In Huston's film, "instead of seeing first "a woman" and only later recognizing her as "his wife," Gabriel can never possibly doubt who the "woman" at the top of the stairs is" (Wawrzycka 68). This is probably a result of the differences between one code and another, and even because of the splendid photograph of Anjelica Huston on screen. Even though those differences are notable, the result is very similar. Gabriel sees Gretta standing at the stairs "full of love and admiration" (Kelleher 428).

Then, Gretta and Gabriel take the carriage to the Gresham Hotel. The scene in the hotel between Gabriel and Gretta lasts only a few minutes because, as the climax is near, Joyce accelerates the rhythm. There, she reveals her secret to Gabriel. In her youthful in Galway she fell in love with a young boy called Michael Fury who would soon die, maybe of melancholy. He was ill and he went to see Gretta before she went away: the poor boy died of cold, waiting for her. Gretta lies down in bed, downhearted. On the other hand, this revelation, as I said before, changes Gabriel's consciousness: he becomes aware of

his irresponsible conduct at the party. This change provoked by Gretta's revelation could lead us to consider Gabriel as a protagonist of a kind of a Bildungsroman. He realizes that his behaviour was absurd and even childish and at the moment that his wife confessed him her secret, he grows up as a person. He undergoes a profound change in his conception of reality and his notion on life and death, and finally he understands that he was wrong. According to Vincent P. Pecora, "Readers disagree about whether Gabriel's new understanding of himself at the end of the story is a positive movement beyond his oppressive conditions or simply a resigned acceptance of the inevitability of his own death and decay" (233). The consequences are hardly conceivable and that is why Loomis points out that "The vision is in sharp contrast with his previous view of the world: in fact, it literally opens a new world to him" (149). We can infer from his words that it has a positive effect on him, but there are other opinions and the only unquestionable idea is that Gabriel consciousness changes, that he progresses towards more mature perceptions. In this respect, this last story would be related to *A Portrait* because in spite of the fact that it is not a proper Bildungsroman, there are traces of it in the protagonist development.

This progress reaches its strongest expression in his final interior monologue. I understand that the last part of the work appears to be Gabriel's epiphany in which he acknowledges the real meaning of things. The vision is narrated following an innovative technique that Joyce will develop in the future, and will masterfully employ in *Ulysses*. He anticipates his well-known stream of consciousness to embody Gabriel's vision. The result is a fascinating ending based on a courageous declaration of intent. At the end of the story, Gabriel feels lonely and ridiculous. This traumatic revelation urges Gabriel to look inside himself for the real meaning of life and death, and in this sense the technique employed by Joyce is absolutely perfect. Dealing with the narrative technique used by Joyce, Huston's visualization and transcription into images of Gabriel's interior

monologue is very attractive. He transforms Gabriel thoughts into images and the result is flawless. Gabriel rests on the window frame and all his memories and thoughts quivering in his head are translated into images accompanied by Gabriel's voice over in the form of interior monologue. He meditates on life and death. Images of his Aunt Julia's death come and go in his mind. "Poor Aunt Julia! She, too, would soon be a shade with the shade of Patrick Morkan and his horse" (Joyce 276). He also considers Michael Fury and realizes that he has never known the meaning of love. And he continues watching the snow falling all over Ireland, "upon all the living and the dead" (Joyce 278). The symbolism of the snow is a central element in the story. Snow falls all over Ireland and all over the world. Death awaits all of us, and snow covers all parts of the world, but there is another interesting reflection related to this. Snow falls upon the living and the dead reminding us of our shared future, snow continues falling over regardless who is watching. "Snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain... It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Fury lay buried" (Joyce 278). For this reason, there is a contradictory message in his words. This idea is also expressed by Silvana Caporanetti: "[The Dead] retains an essential ambiguity and therefore communicates a subtle emotion" (417). On the one hand, it deals with ephemeral human nature (regardless what we are, we will become shadows and we will be covered by the snow) but on the other hand, snow falls also over the churchyard, over the dead. This deals with transcendental matters, with hope, with mystical yearning, with eternity. Snow will continue falling over us when we die, implying, in a way, that we will be there even after we die, to be covered, perhaps protected, by the snow. In this respect, snow covers everything, irrespective on whom is falling, regardless on the living and the dead, offering a perspective of eternity.

Conclusion

As a conclusion I would say that throughout this paper I have tried to explain the most important features of Joyce's "The Dead". In this respect, I have chosen this short story because it exemplifies the birth of James Joyce's distinctive style. Firstly, I have focused on its Irishness, and I have tried to give an accurate approach of this issue in the story, offering different examples in order to understand Joyce's obsession. Then I have analysed the story itself, arguing that the structure follows a logical pattern from the general to the particular, preparing the ground for the final denouement. I have also considered the style, specially focusing in his final interior monologue, because as I have explained before, Joyce's career is profoundly marked by this technique. Besides, I have taken into consideration John Huston's homonymous film, because it is important to show how a celebrated film director visualizes or understands Joyce's universe. In this respect, I have compared some critical scenes from both the text and the film, concluding that apart from slight alterations, the film could be taken as an example of what an adaptation should be.

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