

Gabriel's Epiphany and the End of Resentment: Religious Feeling in James Joyce's *The Dead*

Martin Fashbaugh

Abstract

This article supports three interconnected points regarding James Joyce's "The Dead." First, the paper shows mimetic desire's importance in the early formation of an aesthetic experience. Gabriel Conway's realization that his wife Gretta has been harboring a romantic passion for the long-dead Michael Furey naturally stimulates jealousy, which is a consequence of his mimetic desire. Second, this essay examines how Gabriel chooses, perhaps instinctually, to respond to this mimetic circumstance constructively rather than destructively through the abortive gesture of appropriation. Third, I argue that Gabriel's deferral of violence in favor of symbolic appropriation is a spiritual and religious event that moves far beyond the personal. He symbolically appropriates not only Gretta and Furey but essentially the whole of Ireland, creating this feeling of oneness and inseparability which often grounds religious experience. However, I also point out that this transcendence is likely a tentative one, for the glorious vision of appropriating the entirety of the Irish "dead" suggests Gabriel is quite ambitious and prone to jealousy and feelings of inadequacy. While making these three primary points, I also discuss the role the epiphany plays in the recreation of the originary scene. I argue that Gabriel's epiphany, which is that both his marriage and life have been, for the most part, dispassionate, helps to facilitate the transition from mimetic desire to the symbolic acquisition of the originary scene.

Keywords: James Joyce, "The Dead," Eric Gans, originary scene, mimetic desire, René Girard, Generative Anthropology

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I.

James Joyce's "The Dead," which is the last story in *The Dubliners*, ends with the middle-aged and learned protagonist, Gabriel Conroy, gazing out his hotel window and imagining the entirety of Ireland enveloped in snow. He mentally traverses the Bog of Allen, the Shannon waves, "every part of the dark central plain," "the treeless hills," and, finally, "every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried" (242).

Gabriel had just learned after a Christmas party that Furey was a young man whom his wife Gretta loved and who died after risking his frail health by running in the rain to see Gretta one last time before she moved east. After Gretta tells the story, Gabriel succumbs to jealousy and anger because he realizes that she never loved him as she loved Furey. However, after Gretta falls asleep, Gabriel's rage diminishes, and the character gains a more objective view of the experience. He escapes his prison of self-pity by imaginatively drifting away from his hotel chamber and out over various Irish landmarks, eventually settling over Michael Furey's grave in a churchyard somewhere in the west of Ireland. As I will show in this essay, Gabriel's escape demonstrates Eric Gans's concept of the deferral of violence through representation.^[1] Of course, the violence Gabriel defers is not of the physical sort; it is not as if Gretta should soon become concerned for her safety now that she has revealed the secret she has harbored for the duration of her marriage. However, Gabriel's muffled hostility would be damaging enough; it would add bitterness, resentment, and an increase in the emotional and psychological distance that has defined their marriage up to this point.

One point that I am making in this essay is that Gabriel's renewed passion for Gretta, which had been intensifying before her shocking revelation, is mimetic, as René Girard would characterize it.^[2] His discovery that Gretta harbors a romantic passion for a former lover leads to sexual jealousy and the epiphany that his life and marriage have been essentially passionless. Furthermore, this essay examines how Gabriel responds to this epiphany through the aborted gesture of appropriation, an act of deferment he sustains through imaginative flights of fancy on which he can re-enact the originary scene through the symbolic appropriation of Gretta and her former lover, Michael Furey. Furthermore, this paper argues that Gabriel's deferral of violence in favor of symbolic appropriation is a spiritual and religious event that moves far beyond the personal. He symbolically appropriates not only Gretta and Furey but essentially the whole of Ireland, creating this feeling of oneness and inseparability which often grounds religious experience. I would add, however, that this transcendence is likely a tentative one, for the glorious vision of appropriating the entirety of the Irish "dead" suggests Gabriel is quite ambitious and prone to jealousy and feelings of inadequacy.

II.

The first two-thirds of the story presents Gabriel as a self-conscious figure without revealing any mimetic rivalry that contributes to these occasional inadequate feelings. Mimetic desire reveals itself after the party when the guests are preparing to depart, and Gretta stands in the middle of the staircase, entranced by the song "The Lass of Aughrim," sung by Bartell D'Arcy. Here is how Joyce describes Gabriel's reaction to his wife, whom he does not recognize at first, standing near the top of the steps, "in the shadow also. . . leaning on the banisters, listening to something":

There was grace and mystery in her attitude as if she were a symbol of something. He asked himself what is a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow, listening to distant music, a symbol of. If he were a painter he would paint her in the attitude. Her blue felt hat would show off the bronze of her hair against the darkness and the dark panels of her skirt would show off the light ones. Distant Music he would call the picture if he were a painter. (236)

It is reasonable to presume that the learned and erudite Gabriel has had plenty of experience viewing works of high visual art depicting women in such a manner. Gabriel is likely using an assortment of acclaimed painters as external mediators to serve as models for his artistic vision. It is also important to point out that Gabriel is simulating the aborted gesture of appropriation by declaring her, through the act of painting her (imaginatively, of course), as sacred; he immediately sees Gretta, after all, as a “symbol of something,” a sign of something sacred. As Gans has argued, this act of declaring something to be sacred and beautiful depends on abandoning the pursuit of that object to obtain appetitive satisfaction: “The ‘beauty’ of the sign, its closure as a formal entity, reflects the renunciation of its original appetitive goal of attaining its object, which it re-presents” (*New Way of Thinking* 12). While looking up at Gretta, Gabriel sees her as unobtainable, and this temporal act of renunciation enables him to render her as an aesthetic and sacred object of high art.

And while this sacralizing act is one of mimicking external rather than internal mediators, this rendering of Gretta as a symbol, nonetheless, creates a sexual longing in Gabriel for her. As they walk to the cab that will take them to their hotel, Joyce describes the nature of Gabriel’s passion: “The blood went bounding along his veins; and the thoughts went rioting through his brain, proud, joyful, tender, valorous” (231). This passion continues to manifest in intense feelings and images as they board the carriage and as they enter the hotel and make their way to their room: “He longed to be alone with her. When the others had gone away, when he and she were in the room in the hotel, then they would be alone together” (232). It is interesting to note that none of this sexual feeling comes from an actual conversation he is having with her; it is the painterly image she projects on the staircase and subsequent mysterious behavior that enlivens his romantic interest in Gretta, and he is anticipating actualizing his desire to make love to her. His imaginary act illustrates Gans’s assertion that the aesthetic “mobilizes our desires for both appetitive satisfaction and further abortive acts of representation” (*New Way of Thinking* 207). Gans describes an endless oscillation between moving towards and moving away from appropriating the object, with each move influencing the other.

This romantic desire to appropriate, stimulated by his esthetic act of imagining a painting of Gretta, is transformed into anger when he learns the song that mesmerized his wife reminded her of an old beloved, Michael Furey. Even though Furey is dead, a song has brought him back to life to become a rival to whom Gabriel feels inferior: “Gabriel felt humiliated by the failure of his irony and by the evocation of this figure from the dead, a boy

in the gasworks. 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. A shameful consciousness of his own person assailed him" (238). Gabriel is having the ever-common Joycean epiphany, which in his case is the sudden awareness that his life and marriage have been mostly passionless. Gabriel's attention towards Gretta has shifted to Furey, who is, oddly enough, an internal mediator to whom he feels inferior. Gabriel is aware that he cannot return to the perceived originary scene of Gretta's romantic passion; therefore, he cannot fight or possess the rival, Furey, and the young Gretta. He can, however, use his visual imagination to return to this scene he had never inhabited. Gabriel's epiphany comes from both the realization of his inability to be at the scene and his ability to memorialize it. As Marina Ludwigs explains, an epiphany is "the oscillation between two images: those of the object as firstness, to which we no longer have access, and the object as a sign representing or mediating this originally lost firstness." Therefore, epiphanies are "paradigmatic aesthetic moments, which produce a re-enactment of the originary scene." Gabriel demonstrates Ludwigs' claim that epiphanies involve the re-enactment of the originary scene, for what soon follows Gabriel's epiphany is a reconstruction of the romantic (and tragic) scene of Gretta's final departure from Furey, one that has left Gretta with a sense of unresolved sexual passion.

It is also worth pointing out that Gabriel's epiphany results from an awareness of a rival; his realization of his passionless life results from this mimetic triangle involving himself, the dead Michael Furey, and Gretta. Joyce first directs our attention to the hatred and resentment that the competition with the rival brings. To remove these feelings of shame, Gabriel must now remove himself spiritually from the imagined center of conflict existing between Furey and himself. However, the renunciation he engages in will lead to much more than declaring Gretta, the object of his desire, to be sacred. As someone who feels alienated not just from his wife but, as we learn earlier in the story, his country of Ireland's heritage and culture as well (reflecting, of course, Joyce's self-imposed exile from the Emerald Isle), the triangular scene between Gabriel, Gretta, and himself is made into a sacred emblem of all of humanity, or, at least, all Irish society.

III.

Gretta's deteriorating emotional control helps to persuade Gabriel to remove himself from the mimetic scene as she begins to narrate the story of her history with Furey. She informs Gabriel of the time one early winter when she was about to leave her grandmother's home in the west of Ireland to travel to Dublin. She pauses to sigh within the tale's telling, which is one of the first clues of how emotionally taxing a story it is for her to tell. She must then abandon her narration soon after getting to the part involving the night before she left for Dublin, with Furey standing in the rain outside Gretta's grandmother's house and throwing gravel up against the window to get her attention: "She stopped, choking with sobs and, overcome by emotion, flung herself face downward on the bed, sobbing in the quilt" (240).

Up to this point, Gabriel has been asking questions that force Gretta to continue with the story. However, Gabriel becomes “shy of intruding on her grief” and walks away to peer out the window. His growing awareness of his wife’s raw humanity makes him less assertive about acquiring additional facts concerning her early romance, let alone continuing the attempt to make love to her.

Gabriel is also experiencing a growing empathy for Gretta, which causes his resentment for her and Michael to dissipate as his focus shifts from his rival to Gretta. After Gretta falls asleep, Gabriel looks

for a few moments *unresentfully* on her tangled hair and half-opened mouth, listening to her deep-drawn breath. . . It hardly pained him now to think how poor a part he, her husband, had played in her life. . . His curious eyes rested long upon her face and hair; and, he thought of what she must have been then, in that time of her first girlish beauty, a strange, friendly pity for her entered his soul. (emphasis added 240)

In sympathy for Gretta in her most vulnerable state, Gabriel seemingly loses touch with his resentment and is no longer troubled by the self-conscious awareness that he has been a poor, romantically challenged husband. This resentment, one would argue, is not disappearing but is about to be transformed aesthetically into a series of visions. Soon after Gretta falls asleep, her revelations cause Gabriel to imagine what Aunt Julia’s deathbed scene might look like, with his “useless” words unable to console Aunt Kate. Gabriel has drawn a connection between his sexual impotence, brought on by Gretta’s revelation of her history with Furey, and his perceived inability to establish intimate relationships with family and, perhaps, friends. Next, Gabriel’s attention shifts, once more, to his wife and Furey: Gretta “had locked in her heart so many years that image of her lover’s eyes when he had told her that he did not wish to live” (241). Here, Gabriel constructs an originary scene of desire involving himself, Gretta, and Furey. Still, since the scene has already happened, Gabriel has no recourse but to abort the pursuit of his wife in favor of the creation of the sign for this scene.

Gabriel is now ready to leave the bitterness and resentment behind and transform the experience of hearing her story into images associated with Gretta’s past, as indicated in the story’s next-to-last paragraph:

Generous tears filled Gabriel’s eyes. He had never felt like that himself towards any woman but he knew that such a feeling must be love. 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. He was conscious of, but could not apprehend, their wayward and flickering existence. 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. (241-42)

Here, Gabriel appropriates by reconstructing the scene of Gretta's last encounter with Furey when he stands under the tree in the rain. Rather than harbor rage over Gretta's long-harbored secret, Gretta's slumber allows him to back away from further pursuit of the details of her romance with Furey and, instead, transform the morbidly romantic scene from her past by assembling fresh mental images of it. Ironically but understandably, these images make him love Gretta, perhaps more than he had ever loved her before. He chooses to designate her and the scene with Furey as sacred, which transforms his jealousy into love, a transcendent feeling that takes him away from the hotel room and "out into a grey impalpable world."

IV.

This transformation from pursuit to representation nears its completion at the story's end when Gabriel begins to imaginatively "set out on his journey westward" (242) and witness the snow falling over Ireland, across "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" (242). While tethered to the Furey story, Gabriel's imagination is free to provide associative imagery that redirects his attention from the mimetic scene of resentment to Furey's grave and sad images of barren Ireland he associates with his wife's former lover. Gabriel's imagination then soars beyond Furey's grave as he envisions the other "crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns." In the story's final and iconic sentence, the narrator describes Gabriel's "soul" as swooning "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" (242). Here, Gabriel has an aesthetic, romantic, and religious experience due to this feeling of solidarity with Furey, nature, and seemingly all humanity. He is, as Gans would put it, experiencing an "esthetic ecstasy" that "derives its force from reexperiencing the birth of transcendence. . ." (*A New Way of Thinking* 15). Gabriel's esthetic experience begins with envisioning Gretta and Furey's last romantic encounter and then opens to the wider world and the originary scene of the birth of human culture by imagining the snow falling on all the living and all the dead.

The comprehensiveness of Gabriel's transcendental vision is, one could argue, an expression to transform his resentment. Still, it is not farfetched to presume that it serves an end, to later redirect his energies towards strengthening his marriage. On one level, Gabriel's decision "to travel westward" involves mental travel. Still, we could also take it literally to suggest that he has decided to vacation with his wife to the West of Ireland, which until now he had refused to do. Early in the story, Miss Ivors accuses Gabriel of being unpatriotic by traveling in Europe. She gives him a chance to redeem himself by inviting him and his wife

to travel west for the upcoming summer. While Gretta is excited by the idea, Gabriel is not. At the story's end, the narrator suggests that he is now ready to make this trip. This change of mind illustrates that the representation of the originary scene does not diminish desire; it can help stimulate the resolve to pursue the object with a renewed sense of purpose and a new strategy.

So, while Gabriel's first reaction to the Furey story is jealousy and anger, witnessing his wife's distress over revising the incident causes him to fall in love with her again, as the concluding paragraphs indicate. As mentioned earlier, Gabriel probably has never felt this passionately for his wife until now, ironically, when he realizes that his wife never loved him like she loved Michael Furey. From a Girardian vantage point, Gabriel's passion is mimetic, derived from Furey, who risked his health to be with Gretta one last time. However, the way Gabriel channels his passion demonstrates Gans's conception of the aborted gesture of appropriation. Rather than furtively striving to get Gretta to love him as intensely as she loved Michael, he can release his consciousness from the hotel scene, which links to the presumably originary scene of her romantic life. He aborts this gesture of appropriation and declares Gretta and Michael to be as sacred as the geographical parts of Ireland that Irish poets and artists have lauded for centuries. Gabriel's sacralizing of the scene shows this move away from adulthood, navigating self-consciously through erudite, cosmopolitan circles in mainland Europe. By declaring both the object (Gretta) and internal mediator Furey to be sacred, Gabriel can spiritually remove himself from the originary scene he has constructed to take a mental journey across the country, identifying emblems of Gretta, Furey, and all of Ireland. However, as I noted earlier, this grand vision need not be interpreted as an emblem of Gabriel's magnanimity. We could easily conceive the vision as sublimated violence that emblemizes the vastness of his ambition and ego. Nonetheless, it is also a vision that fulfills the ultimate purpose of art, which is to defer violence and keep the peace.

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Notes

[1] The idea that representation defers violence permeates Gans's work. Gans makes this point in the Introduction to *A New Way of Thinking*, where he claims that the primary function of representation "is to prevent mimetic violence" (xiii). Gabriel's act of representation begins while Gretta sleeps.

[2] Girard introduces this idea of mimetic desire in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (1965).