

All That Is Solid Melts into Air: Visions of Love, Death and Modernity in James Joyce's "The Dead" and Virginia Woolf's "Kew Gardens"

"[Modernity] is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity; it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish." ~ Marshall Berman

As modernity in literature developed in the years straddling the 19th and 20th centuries, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf emerged as writers pushing against traditional formal boundaries. Both used metaphorical language to add layers of meaning to slice-of-life narratives. And despite major differences in the style of wordplay and narrative structures they employed in short stories, both authors were after the same idea: expressions of the human condition in the modern era that would ring true to readers on multiple levels.

The conclusions of "The Dead" and "Kew Gardens" reveal Joyce and Woolf's differing perspectives and attitudes to that human condition. For Joyce, love is complicated, and death seems to be everywhere in the years following the Industrial Revolution and leading into World War I. While Woolf also struggles with the challenges of a swiftly changing society, she takes a more hopeful position, suggesting that love, and harmony between humans, nature and technology might be possible.

Written in 1907 and published in 1914, "The Dead" contrasts a festive New Year's gathering full of music and feasting with the idea that death is an inevitable fact of life and the dead walk among us always. "One by one, they were all becoming shades," thinks Gabriel Conroy of his party-throwing relatives (Joyce 203). Joyce uses death as a

metaphorical stand-in for emotional, political, and other forms of stagnation; some of his party people may even be considered “the living dead” for their inertia and resignation (Cain).

As the story winds down, married protagonists Gabriel and Gretta Conroy have a conversation about a long-dead figure from Gretta’s youth, Michael Furey. Joyce writes Furey as an ephemeral, yet very real character in the story, conferring on him at least as much presence as Aunt Kate or Mr. D’Arcy. Yet he is an unreconcilable and untouchable obstacle between Gretta and Gabriel.

For Joyce the living and the dead co-habit the undulating metaphysical landscapes of the modern era. He specifically unites them in his closing sentences: “... 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” (Joyce 204). After all the existential drama, Joyce lets the reader down easy with what’s less a denouement or epiphany than a dissolution, a resigned and philosophical fade.

Woolf’s “Kew Gardens”, first published in 1919, also features couples in the concluding paragraphs of a detailed and impressionistic narrative that’s set in the famous London garden. Her lovers are part of a general parade of garden visitors, whose petty concerns interrupt the longer rhythms of nature going about its business. In “Kew Gardens”, references to death are less explicit, but alluded to as part of a general dissolution of boundaries and the organic cycles of nature.

Woolf’s version of death is more a returning to the elements, but with the possibility of re-birth. Her conclusion to “Kew Gardens” is also a philosophical fade, on the quiet side, but one with much more uplift and life and spirit to it.

Joyce and Woolf are both masters at sentence construction and language manipulation, deftly using metaphors and other literary devices to convey mood,

atmosphere, and thoughts about various aspects of society, technology, and the natural world. Both “The Dead” and “Kew Gardens” deploy natural elements – climate, weather, wildlife – to encase and comment on human activity. Joyce turns to snowfall, which is famously “general all over Ireland” as the “The Dead” draws to a close (Joyce 203). This evanescent manifestation of the winter season confers peace and a sense of inevitability to the narrative and to the love story of Gabriel and Gretta. It also erases distances between the present and the past, as the snow obscures both the Dublin foreground and the hilltop where Michael Furey has lain buried for decades.

Woolf uses heat in the same way Joyce uses snow: as a mechanism for neutralizing the drama of the human interaction, casting a film-y haze over the proceedings, dulling certainty and lines of division. Sounds of technological progress and the urban environment – “the drone of the aeroplane”, the grinding of omnibuses changing gears, the “murmuring” of the city – peep through, punctuating the miasma (Woolf 52).

In both stories, the authors use dissolving or evaporating as a metaphor for the change in the world that’s rapidly proceeding, whether their characters can keep up with it or not. In the second last paragraph of “The Dead”, Gabriel senses the “wayward and flicker of existence” of the souls that have passed (Joyce 203). Joyce writes, “His own identity was fading out into the grey impalpable world; the solid world itself which these dead had one time reared and lived in was dissolving and dwindling” (Joyce 203).

In “Kew Gardens” the characters pass through the garden as if in a painting, “...enveloped in layer after layer of green blue vapour, in which at first their bodies had substance and a dash of colour, but later both substance and colour dissolved in the green-blue atmosphere” (Woolf 52). Later, passersby are written as “dissolving like drops of water in the yellow and green atmosphere, staining it faintly with red and blue.

It seemed as if all gross and heavy bodies had sunk down in the heat motionless and lay huddled upon the ground” (Woolf 52). These bodies collapse in a mass, Woolf suggests, oppressed on this day by the heat, but perhaps by so much more. They lose their individuality, voices mixing, words obscured, the illegible babble punctuated by the harsher sounds of industry. The distinct colour palettes present in both short stories amplify and extend these references to the shifting elemental. Joyce’s “The Dead” is all shades of grey, silver, and white, muted, calm. By contrast, Woolf’s story is a riot of colour. Green, blue, green-blue, yellow and black, pink and snow white, yellow and green, red and blue, and “the petals of myriads of flowers flashed their colours in the air” (Woolf 52) – all these references occur in just the last two paragraphs of “Kew Gardens”. Here, the energy of life is palpable and joyous.

Joyce and Woolf were both literary titans who manipulated language to suggest rather than state their ideas about post-industrial modernity and the changing world. As part of the Bloomsbury Group, a social and cultural movement with progressive ideas about society and literature, Woolf alludes obliquely to the changes afoot in her historical moment, even if she is writing about a humble moth or the lifecycle of a pond. Joyce held strong political beliefs and thoughts about class, poverty etc., but often felt estranged from his community and country. That alienation comes through in much of his work, including “The Dead” which describes the literal and emotional distance between Gabriel and his sleeping wife.

Still, there are so many similarities between the two writers. Both authors honour and address the complexity of relationships between men and women, a complexity that was evolving and intensifying in the early years of the 20th century. And both cram their elegantly written short stories with sub-text, unspoken tragedies, and nostalgia of various kinds. The conclusions to neither “The Dead” nor “Kew Gardens”

conclude anything. They are open-ended commentaries on human frailty and a future that is uncertain.

In the end, the biggest difference between the works of these two literary giants is one of degree, one of perspective or attitude. With the conclusion to his best-loved story, "The Dead", Joyce seems to imply that, surrounded by the dead, we are always dying. As she closes out the brief but impactful "Kew Gardens", Woolf, with her emphasis on the warm and colourful nature of the world, leans more into the idea that we are surrounded by life.

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