English & Cultural Studies 1A03

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Study Notes for James Joyce's, "The Dead"

"The Dead" is the last story in the short story collection called *Dubliners*, published in 1914. It is by far the longest and most developed story in the collection that includes two other texts for which you are expected to have a detailed understanding, "Araby" and "Eveline." "The Dead" is now celebrated as among the most important short stories ever written in English. As such, it is not only a remarkable achievement in its own right; "The Dead" is also a type of classroom for shorter genres, offering us an education in how a short story works and how it can be *read* or interpreted in the most generative way. "The Dead" is thus both a short story and a lesson in the short story.

When the story was first published in 1914, Joyce still had a lifetime of writing ahead of him. He would go on to write some of the most significant *novels* of the 20th century, including *Ulysses* -- a landmark experimental novel that set a new standard for the genre. (My late Scottish grandmother recalled reading a copy of the novel—which had been widely banned for its supposed "obscenity"--that had been smuggled into Edinburgh after its publication in 1922.) This level of achievement speaks to Joyce's vision, his capacity to take existing genres and to do something extraordinary with them.

"The Dead" is an exceedingly complex work of literature, building confidently and in a scrupulously careful way towards its enigmatic conclusion, but the basic plot details of the story itself are not particularly complicated. Kate and Julia Morkan, the Morkan sisters, along with their niece, Mary Jane Morkan, are holding their "annual dance" (2). Gabriel Conroy is nephew to the Morkan sisters—their favourite nephew—and arrives at the party accompanied by his wife Gretta. The bulk of the rest of the narrative is taken up by a series of adjacent and more or less self-contained scenes at the party involving Gabriel, culminating in the vividly realized moment, much later in the evening, when he catches a glimpse of Gretta listening intently to a piece of music. Gabriel and Gretta then leave the party, and the story concludes with them together in a darkened hotel room where something extraordinary happens to both characters. In the end, Gretta and Gabriel are neither alone nor together but instead <u>alone, together</u>. What does that mean? The story in its entirety clears a space for Joyce to think that difficult thought and to invite us to do the same.

The party, so lovingly and carefully detailed by Joyce, is for friends, family, and students of the Morkans, who all teach music. They teach music in a story in which one particular piece of music, a sentimental ballad called *The Lass of Aughim*, plays a central role. (What is that role?) The party takes place in 1904 on the occasion of the Feast of the Epiphany, an important holiday in the Christian liturgical calendar during the first week of January that celebrates the appearance or revelation of Christ to the Gentiles. Joyce takes the concept of the epiphany, with its powerful religious meanings, and repurposes it for a secular or non-religious context. In *Dubliners*, an epiphany is the instant in which a sudden and deeply affecting shift in perspective takes place, either in a character or in the reader observing a character.

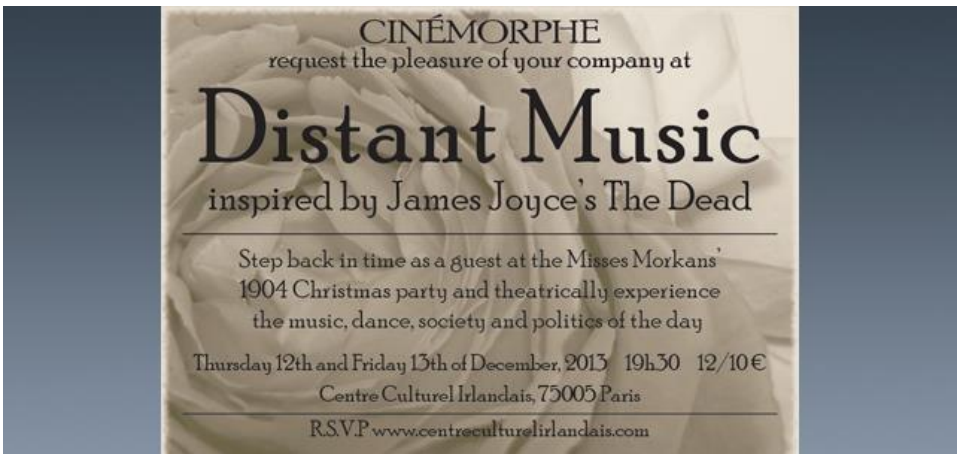
It is the new year, a time of transition. --And so it is an appropriate time for a rather staid and fussy character, Gabriel Conroy, to experience a flash of understanding about himself and others after which there is no turning back, i.e., an epiphany. Epiphanies also characterize the other stories in *Dubliners*. In the conclusion to "Araby," for example, the boy recognizes in a flash that his "confused adoration" for Mangan's sister is a kind of empty fantasy, real enough while he was in its thrall, as fantasies often are, but now seen to be remarkably small, substanceless and overblown. The fun-fair called "Araby," whose name trades on racist clichés about an "exotic" "East," is similarly small, substanceless and overblown and so it forms a perfect setting for the boy's realization. Joyce revelled in inventing these sorts of situations, in which the most mundane and everyday events can yield up extraordinary experiences. He expends a great deal of creative energy detailing the everyday worlds of his characters so as to throw into relief the surprising intensity of the epiphany for which those worlds form an occasion.

The fun-fair is thus both the *setting* with which the story concludes and a *metaphor* for an emptiness that the boy faces in himself. The fair's strange deadness connects it to the setting with which the story begins, the neighbourhood along a dead-end street on which the boy lives. Gazing up into the dark empty hall, the boy moves from a condition of unselfconsciousness to acute self-consciousness, i.e., *from* being immersed in his tumultuous feelings, as clichéd as they are, *to* the moment in which he sees himself as if for the first time. Note that he barely knows Mangan's sister, and is oblivious to the question of whether she feels anything at all for him. Up until the concluding moment of the story, he lives mostly in his own head, feeling-wise. But at the fun-fair, he finds himself *beside*-himself. At that moment, he is two boys, not one: the boy who thinks he is in love and the boy who realizes he knows nothing about love. It is important too to see that Joyce doesn't suggest that the boy's empty fantasies are a kind of psychological aberration. Instead, Joyce goes out of his way throughout the story to suggest that the boy falls prey to these sorts of fantasies because he lives in a social setting that is itself remarkably empty. Return to the story and trace those points in which Joyce reminds us of how hollowed out life can be in Dublin, a desiccated and futureless world to which, we can imagine, youth are especially vulnerable. Once you've tracked down the settings and metaphors that capture that emptiness, turn next to those brief moments in which Joyce *also*, paradoxically, affirms the survival of a certain vitality in the Irish, their capacity to make music out of harness-bells. Joyce saw himself as just such a creature, making music out of the everyday, bleak as it so often was.

Joyce leaves his readers hanging at the point of the epiphanies in his short stories. The epiphanies take place and then the short story brings itself to a conclusion. The epiphanies are the principal means by which Joyce's short stories effect closure, so your task as reader is to figure out how that happens. In the case of "Araby," he denies us any knowledge about what becomes of the boy *after* this searingly difficult revelation about himself. And so the epiphanic endings of Joyce's stories are curious things, *both* marking a decisive change, the ringing of a bell that now cannot be un-rung, *and* leaving readers in a condition of suspense, never knowing what might have come next in the lives of the characters who have had such momentously significant experiences. Joyce leaves us up in the air like this because he wants us to focus on the epiphany itself and on how the short story mobilizes its resources (characterization, setting, narrative voice, metaphor and symbol) to prepare us for the epiphany rather than worry about what comes of it or indeed whether anything comes of it. What matters to Joyce is the

incandescent intensity of the "now" or moment of the epiphany . . . and the unique powers of literary fiction to capture that moment. Joyce had faith in the power of fiction both to hold a mirror up to Dubliners, so that they might see all their weaknesses, foibles, pleasures, possibilities, *and* to transform Dubliners by deeply refreshing the languages with which they understood themselves. That commitment to making the everyday, especially the bleakness of everyday life, legible *and* that faith in the transformative power of literature are two central ways in which Joyce is a *modernist*, a creature of *Modernism*, the literary and cultural moment that dominated the most experimental writers in the early part of the twentieth-century.

But the epiphanies can bring Joyce's short stories to a complex conclusion in different ways. (Conclusions in literature worthy of the name are always complex!) Compare "Araby" to "Eveline," for example. "Eveline" concludes with an epiphany for both reader and for Eveline herself, although it isn't the same revelation. All at once, in the story's last sentences, Eveline comes to see that she can't leave Ireland and she can't elope with her lover. Look carefully at how Joyce's narrator characterizes Eveline's state of mind. Be prepared to quote some of Joyce's phrases in your final examination. (Examination tip: accurately quoting phrases, sentences, and verses from the assigned material on this course in your final examination is always viewed very positively.) A kind of immobilizing blankness overcomes Eveline; she seems hardly aware of what is happening to her. It is as if her body has had the revelation but her mind has yet to catch up. Her body freezes and so, in effect, says *no* to eloping with her lover, even if Eveline herself hardly seems conscious of what is happening to her at that instant amid the crowds boarding the ship. We as readers though see much more; *our* epiphany is that Eveline is too attached to the familiarities of home, as bleak and indeed increasingly violent as they are. She lives a life that impoverishes her imagination and starves her spirit, and yet staying put seems, at the moment of truth, to be preferable to radical change. We as readers come to see something new about Eveline. Or perhaps what takes place is that we see now, and only now, looking back at certain details in the short story, that she never was going to leave with her lover. (What details are those, now seen in a different light from the standpoint of the end of the story? How does Joyce differently describe the epiphanies in each of the three stories for which you are responsible?)



Let us return to "The Dead." The Morkan sisters' party is well under way when Gabriel and Gretta arrive. From this point on in the narrative, the story is told in a way that is lensed through Gabriel's words,

thoughts, feelings, and memories, including the complex thoughts and feelings that all but overcome him in the story's concluding moments, when he and his wife have left the party and retired to their hotel room. Gabriel and Gretta arrive at the party covered in snow and it is back into a snowy world that they will go once the party is over. A snowy "outside" world frames the party as indeed it does the short story in which the party figures so prominently. References to the falling snow in fact appear repeatedly in "The Dead," helping to knit the narrative together and preparing us for the concluding paragraph, in which Gabriel looks out of his hotel window, and, seeing the snow continuing to fall, and deeply affected by what he has just heard from Gretta, he finds himself transported in a kind of "swoon" across that snowy world. In this special condition, his mind dilates to the point of seeming to encompass all of the living and the dead of Ireland, upon which the snow indifferently falls. To understand this story means understanding what the falling snow means in the story and how Joyce mobilizes this metaphor to create meaning.

As I've said, the story is constructed around a series of vignettes that blend one into the other in succession. Notice how the narrative of the story, the anonymous voice that tells the tale, moves exactly where Gabriel moves, tracking his thoughts and feelings and words as he meets different guests and travels between different rooms in the Morkan household, eventually following Gabriel out the door, into the streets of snowy Dublin, and coming to a rest—if it is coming to a rest—in the shadowy confines of the hotel room where he and Gretta are staying for the night. The fact that we as readers see the party only as Gabriel is seeing it and the fact that the narrative only attends to Gabriel's view of it reminds us that the Third Person Narration has almost entirely attached itself to Gabriel. (See the Study Notes on Narration for a discussion of the specific narrative form of "The Dead.) The story begins with an odd exchange between Lily and Gabriel; then we see and hear an encounter between Gabriel and the drunkard, Freddy Malins; Mary Jane, the Markan's niece, plays a complicated piece on the piano that Gabriel thinks has no melody (9); distracted by the music, he gazes at a photograph of his mother hanging on the wall, recalling how his mother had once said some slighting things about Gretta that still sting; all of this is taking place while Gabriel is also worried about the dinner speech he has been asked to give, snobbishly concerned that that speech may be too literary for this crowd, about which he can sometimes be quite cruel (for example, thinking of his aunts as "two ignorant old women"); Gabriel dances with Molly Ivors, a classmate and fellow lecturer, a contemporary of Gabriel who unsettles him but jokingly suggesting that he is a "west Briton," i.e., someone who views Ireland as part of a larger Great Britain rather than as an anonymous nation-state, which its own culture, language, and history. Gabriel responds to this good-natured ribbing in his typically thin-skinned way, preferring to dismiss his colleague and friend as a mere "enthusiast" rather than join her in the fun. He patronizingly characterizes her as "the girl or woman or whatever she was."

The character of Molly Ivors is one of many places in Joyce's short stories where the long and tortured history of Ireland's colonization by the British and Ireland's struggle to assert its independence enters into the narrative. (Only two years after *Dubliners* is published, Ireland will witness the *Easter Rebellion*, the armed insurrection in which Irish nationalists attempted to overthrow British rule. That insurrection was quickly crushed and most of the leaders were executed.) Where else does the story evoke that history? What's interesting is that Joyce never seems especially interested in writing directly about that

part of the Irish experience, as important as it is. The Irish experience with the British is the unavoidable historical and cultural and political context for his stories, to be sure, always just beneath the surface and occasionally breaking through the surface. But Joyce is not Blake, for whom the political context (the exploitation of women, the enslavement of children, the prosecution of unjust wars, the creation of disposable populations, the collusion of the church and monarchy and state in suppressing dissent, etc.) is especially active. Instead, Joyce treats the Irish question as a background detail that contributes to his sense of the Irish as a peculiarly immobilized people, trapped by history; that history helps him develop his characters but never becomes the reason for him writing his stories. Joyce also loosens—but never severs--the connection between his fictions and their political context because he didn't want his readers to peg him as a "regional" writer, an Irish writer writing solely about Irish questions. As a "modernist" writer, indeed, as a writer who will come to exemplify that moment in English literary history called "Modernism," Joyce is always touching on more universal themes, questions, and problems. The "Irishness" of the Irish, the historical and political problems that are unique to the Irish experience, is a *means* by which to speak to problems and questions that Joyce treats as universal, i.e. as central to the human experience more generally. So details about the Irish struggle survive in "The Dead" mostly in the form of details that 1) help us understand characters like Molly Ivors and Gabriel Conroy (rather than using characters to help us understand the Irish struggle) and 2) function as metaphors or figures for the frozenness of the Irish critical imagination—the imagination that Joyce believes he can help thaw. Think of the Irish brooch that Ivors wears, where other women at the party are showing their necklines. Think too of how, several times in "The Dead," we are given to see the Wellington Monument, the public monument to the Duke of Wellington, the great British war hero who was born in Ireland and who helped defeat Napoleon in the early part of the 1800's. On each occasion that the monument is evoked, what catches Joyce's eye, through the eyes of the narrator and Gabriel, is that the statue is blanketed in snow. Joyce could not be more obvious in reminding us that for him the Irish question is mostly a prop, yet another way to support other meanings, in this case the snow. The fact that Ivors leaves the party before Gabriel's speech puts to us that as important as the Irish question is, it isn't so important that it needs to stick around at the party. Joyce in a sense asks the Irish question to "leave" his story in the form of having Molly Ivors exit the narrative, bidding the other guests farewell in Gaelic, the ancient language of the Irish. (What language do the women working at the stalls in Araby speak? What is the significance of that language for the story?) Molly Ivors leaves the party and goes out into the snow, which falls equally and indifferently on everyone, the living and the dead, upon Irish nationalists and "west Britons" alike. Metaphorically speaking, the snow offers a perspective that is larger than Ireland. Joyce is cognisant of the Irish question and puts it to use in the narrative as a way to bring out some of Gabriel Conroy's qualities—his fussiness, his inability to abide by intelligent and spirited women, his conservative nature. But Joyce also has other places to be in this story, other questions to pursue than the struggle for Irish independence that was on the threshold of emerging into violence in 1914.

With the dancing and recital over (including Aunt Julia singing a beautiful aria from Bellini . . . signalling to us that she is not as incompetent and out of it as the narrator and Gabriel would have us believe), the dinner is next. The dinner scene begins with a set piece, a long detailed paragraph describing the various food and drink arrayed before the guests. Here we see Joyce lovingly recreating the feast in fiction, not unlike the stanza in Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" in which the speaker calmly describes the flora and fauna of the invisible English garden that appears to him in his mind's eye (invisible because the scene is set in the falling dark). This scene is only one of many in the story in which Joyce expends considerable creative energy on the fine-grained details that help make the scenes he pains feel so convincing, so three dimensional. In preparation for the exam, gather together a list of some of those details, the minutiae and the fine-grained particulars that Joyce pours into his story and that cumulatively help create the visceral feel of the universe in which Joyce's characters live their fictional lives. And those details always do something more than provide the story with a certain high-definition; they also bear weighty symbolic meanings. All of Joyce's short stories are characterized by this doubleness—lots of incidental details that flesh out a fictional scene for us while *also* thrumming with deeper significance. To discuss "The Dead" invariably means addressing that elemental way in which Joyce's story works, i.e., unfurled in these two overlapping registers, one "realistic," attending closely and lovingly to the small details, striving to recreate a believable world, and the other "symbolic," putting those fine-grained details to work to evoke the large problems and questions that fascinate Joyce. The fictions he writes—and he is hardly alone in this—are spaces in which to unfurl those problems and questions without needing for a moment to resolve them. Think for example of how Joyce is careful to point out, through his narrator, that Gabriel's overcoat exhales coldness as he removes it, i.e., that the coat itself is cold and that it brings coldness from the snowy world outside *into* the Morkan household. It's a lovely detail, vivid and familiar; you have to ask yourself what kind of artist notices those things and manages to build them into a narrative? But this detail, like so many other details in the story, is doing more than that. For example, this detail reminds us that whatever the snow represents it cannot be prevented from coming

into the household. Gabriel is "safe" from the snow, and from the symbolic significances that Joyce endows the snow, but perhaps not as "safe" as he thinks. Amid the busyness of the party, he can occupy his mind with other things, but it won't be long, only a few hours later, that the snow will make its symbolic presence felt in his life in ways he might never have imagined. At the end of the story, the snow does not come in with him; rather, he goes out to it. Joyce's seemingly incidental detail about the coldness that Gabriel's coat exhales quietly anticipates that powerful moment.

The meal at the party is followed by the modest and highly formulaic—i.e., predictable and clichéd--speech about which Gabriel has fretted all evening. As he rises to speak at the head of the table, though, it is important to note—because, after all, it is the *narrator* who compels us as readers to make a note of this detail—Gabriel's mind is momentarily elsewhere, outside, where, as he thinks, "the air is pure," and where, in the far distance, the trees in the parks are "weighted with snow." We are reminded of how variable and complicated "snow" is in this story, for here it is associated with a kind of bracing freedom from the everyday life that intrudes upon Gabriel's mind . . . and ours as readers. The narrator lets us see that, as comfortable as Gabriel is with platitudes and decorum, there is another side of him that is drawn—albeit only flickeringly at this point--towards a more capacious and stranger point of view on the world . . . even if that other world feels very indistinct here, as featureless as thin air or as a landscape whose features are obscured by snow. Something larger makes its presence felt in Gabriel's mind, and makes its presence felt at the precise moment that he rises to speak, when you'd think his mind would be most acutely focussed on the polite nicety he has been asked to perform. But the meaning of this other place remains obscure to Gabriel, even as the landscape of Ireland remains buried under a blanket of snow. At the end of the story he will see and understand more . –Not everything, but more. At this moment, it is as if Gabriel has a premonition of that ambiguous experience. For now, it is enough that a "purer" world unfolds outside, just beyond the range of normal sight, even if the meaning of that world remains tantalizingly uncertain to Gabriel (and to us, as readers who are guided by the narrator). –That larger world, that larger perspective remains uncertain and *cold*, its blanketing frigidity functioning as a metaphor that world's striking difference from the warm, comfortable, and familiar world that Gabriel inhabits and that feels oddly small in comparison." "Is there more than this—my worries about my speech, my petty differences with friends and family, my anxious insistence on my superiority over others, my galoshes, my surprise that my wife lived a full and complicated emotional life before we married? Is there a way to love Gretta differently and more expansively than I do now?" Those are the sorts of questions that thoughts of that "purer" and snowy outside world will eventually prompt in Gabriel's mind. The story is preparing us for that turn. Joyce's epiphanies are always set up, prepared for, although we as readers may need sometimes to go back a re-read the story to see how it quietly but insistently prepared itself for its ending. The story concludes open-endedly, raising more questions than answers. It's important to note that Joyce won't answer these questions for us because what interests him *far* more is the yearning of the question that is more fascinating, the ways in which seemingly unconnected everyday experiences—a party, an intimate conversation with a beloved spouse, the advent of an unusually heavy snowfall—can yield larger than life thoughts and feelings, fragile and evanescent, yet real in their own way. Perhaps that is why Joyce expends so much creative effort recreating Dublin from, as it were, the ground up, small detail by small detail.

The Morkan's party, and the world it represents, offers hospitable refuge from the cold, to be sure. But Joyce's story captures a spirit yearning to know more than that refuge, longing to experience the nature of things from a broader perspective, even if it is one that requires us momentarily to abandon the reassurances of family and friends, and the reassurance that comes from thinking you understand your spouse and your marriage. The snow, and the wide world far beyond this little party hails him, distracts him, haunts him, even if he isn't exactly sure of what that distraction means. After dinner, Gabriel will observe his wife momentarily distracted by a piece of music. So like him, she is capable of being in two places at once, both in the Morkan home and transported somewhere else. The concluding scene of the story is here making its presence felt earlier in the text. Gabriel delivers his speech, which is included verbatim by the omniscient narrator, helping to create the illusion that we too are somehow present at this festive meal. The speech emphasizes the hospitality of the Irish in general and the hospitality of his three hosts in particular. Hospitality is an important and complicated principle and practice. It is important enough that ancient Greek thinkers addressed it, as do the authors of the Old and New Testaments. Indeed, the question of hospitality lies at the heart of every world religion. Hospitality means the willingness and the ability to cede one's place and one's voice to another, and to welcome the other, even and especially the stranger, the strange other, into your own home. The question of hospitality looms very large for us today, for example, when, as a country, we welcome men, women and children from forms of political violence that are almost impossible to imagine from the point of view of the relative safety of the university classroom. What is interesting to note is how Joyce introduces hospitality into the story using such an unpromising vehicle, namely the character of Gabriel Conroy, who can be quite *in*hospitable to others. That is to say, the question will loom larger and larger as the story unfolds but it is raised first by a character who seems hardly to understand it and who would prefer to speak of it, at least at this moment in the story, before his fellow dinner guests, in the language of polite but rather tired clichés. In other words, hospitality is much more important and complex than Gabriel lets it be. In his speech, Gabriel affirms a long tradition of Irish hospitality, but, as a man who fusses over appearances, he would rather cultivate the appearance of hospitality than its reality. He would rather speak the words of hospitality than live their substance. That will change, at least partly, after the party, when Gabriel's mind is compelled to be hospitable to thoughts and feelings that are indeed strange.

During the course of his dinner speech, Gabriel remembers the dearly departed, welcoming and ceding a place at the table for "thoughts of the past, of youth, of changes, of absent faces that we miss here tonight" (23). Joyce reminds us that any hospitality worthy of the name must be a hospitality or generous openness not only to the living but also to the dead. Gabriel doesn't see this, not yet, but at the end of the story what he says here will belatedly mean a very great deal, for it is there, in the wake of Gretta's confession to him, that "thoughts of the past, of youth, of changes, of absent faces" will come to mean so much more. We know he isn't giving his own words much thought (and Joyce saw his role as writer to help the Irish give their words much more thought) because he hardly finishes evoking all of these losses and "sad memories" before he quickly dismisses his thoughts as "gloomy moralizing" (23).

The party eventually breaks up, each of the guests going out into the snow and darkness of predawn Dublin. Before he leaves, Gabriel catches himself looking up at his wife, who seems lost in thought. He stands in partial darkness, as does she. What is the symbolic significance of this small but fine-grained detail in the text? For a moment, Gabriel isn't sure who he is looking at. Looking "up the staircase" he sees "A woman . . . standing near the top of the first flight in the shadow also." A "woman," yes, and then a sentence later the narrator confirms that "It was his wife." Why does the narrator open a space, a breath, between the instant that Gabriel looks up the staircase and the instant the he recognizes the woman as his wife? What symbolic significance does this space carry? It will help to return to this particular passage in the text and attend closely to its details. How specifically does Joyce give it the incandescence that it possesses? How does Joyce use the resources of language to make it seem like time slows down? Gretta seems imbued with "grace and mystery," Gabriel observes, "as if she were a symbol of something." What does Joyce mean here by "grace and mystery"? What do those words mean *here*? Joyce is inviting us to read his language as carefully as we are invited to read the language of poems on our course. So tarrying with moment like this one, a moment into which Joyce is palpably pouring so much, is important. It's important, as always, not to gloss over the details but instead to dwell patiently with them. (The experience of literature always involves this kind of slowing down, this attentiveness to language's relationship to meaning. That's one of the many reasons why, say, Cliff

Notes can provide a useful introduction to a literary text, but after that they offer you very little. Cliff Notes don't attend to the fine-grained details of the texts and they don't attend to the ways in which those details bear the weight of the text's most important meanings. And don't forget too that Cliff Notes are marred by factual errors that you don't want to reproduce.) As readers, *we* are invited to think carefully about this *tableau*, this moment seemingly frozen in time, not least because, revealingly, Gabriel struggles to do the same—he struggles to give himself permission to let that sense of "grace and mystery" wash over him. Perhaps that's not so surprising, when you think about it. He's a man who worries a lot about keeping his composure. And yet in the presence of his wife, that proves very difficult to do. Rather than dwelling with the strangeness of briefly seeing his wife as someone *other* than his wife, rather than giving himself over to the "grace and mystery" of seeing Gretta transported the way that she is, and rather than letting this not-knowing Gretta transform him, Gabriel does what he can to contain the moment and to reduce it to something more reassuringly familiar and much less mysterious. He acknowledges that what he is seeing makes it seem as if Gretta "were a symbol of something." *Something* . . . for a moment Gabriel is unsure about the larger significance of what he is seeing. "He asked himself what is a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow, listening to distant music, a symbol of" (27). Several things are going on here, each calling for your attention as reader. Notice, for example, that he refers to Gretta as "a woman," preferring generalize the scene. He prefers to think of the person before him as a "woman" rather than the specific woman that is his wife. Why? He is getting ready to dissolve Gretta into his sentimental painting of her because that is safer. The imagined painting renders her experience, which evokes such powerful and strange feelings in Gabriel, safer. But there is also a more affirming significance to referring to Gretta generally as "a woman." Thinking of her in this way may be how Gabriel acknowledges that there are forces at work in this scene that are larger than Gretta, and larger than his marriage to her. That in fact will be a realization about life that Gabriel will shortly make. So, wondering to himself about what "a woman standing on the stairs . . . listening to distant music" is a "symbol of" has both positive and negative meanings, one helping us understand the limitations of Gabriel's character, the other its strengths. Notice too how Joyce concludes his sentence: "a symbol of." Joyce indulges in a grammatical mistake, i.e., finishing a sentence with a preposition, in this case "of." The awkwardness of that mistake is telling, for it reminds us of Gabriel's own awkwardness, as he struggles to make sense of what he is seeing and feeling. At this charged moment, Gretta's "attitude" ("attitude" here bears its older meaning, i.e., the expressive posture of a body; Keats uses the word in the same way. Where?) evokes "something" and for an instant it doesn't matter that Gabriel knows definitively what that "something" is, only that the moment is evocative, that there is more happening here than meets his eye. She is a symbol of something that isn't yet defined. There is more to Gretta than meets the eye, his eye. But Gabriel quickly breaks that spell and immediately imagines painting a painting of the scene as a way of flattening and fixing the moment, and as a way of rendering what feels three-dimensional into two dimensions. Obscure feelings get corralled into sentimental familiarities. Galloping ahead of himself and as far away from the obscurities and difficulties of the moment at hand, he's already got a rather clichéd title in mind for the painting, namely *Distant Music*. He prefers the assurances of a sentimental image over the unknown possibilities of the complicated real life he shares with Gretta. He doesn't quite have the insight that the speaker of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" has, i.e., the speaker who acknowledges his strong attraction to the beautiful

images on the urn but who finally must also acknowledge that those images can be flat, empty and even deadening, “forlorn.”

Gretta, we discover, has heard a piece of music sung by Bartell D’Arcy. D’Arcy is suffering a bad cold; his voice is uncertain and he is unsure about the lyrics, and yet for all those difficulties the music still deeply affects Gretta. (Again, Joyce provides these wonderfully suggestive details 1) to flesh out the character and 2) to bear the weight of symbolic significance. Why would Joyce have this plaintive song be song by a singer who is having difficulty singing?) Or as we will learn, and as Gabriel will learn, it isn’t the music that is so affecting but the old memories that are hooked into that music. It’s interesting to note that Gretta is undone by hearing a sentimental song whereas Gabriel steels himself by converting the unsettling experience of seeing Gretta captivated in this way by transforming that scene into a sentimental painting. The sentimental song transports Gretta; the sentimental painting offers Gabriel a kind of refuge from being transported. (Why do you suppose Joyce opposes the two characters in this way? To what effect?) Joyce here touches on a phenomenon that I’ll wager each of you in this class has experienced at one time or another, an experience that has been a subject of discussion going all the way back to the ancient Greeks—namely, how music is closely tied to memory and more specifically to the memory of old feelings. Music can be the quickest means by which our ghosts, our past experiences, especially past experiences that were saturated with strong feelings, gain access to our present. Such is the strangely evocative power of music—i.e., to carry us back to what we felt once about something in our past. It is the door, as it were, to the dead. Music compels us to be hospitable to past events that meant something dear to us. And music is a matter to which “The Dead” returns several times. The short story is haunted by music, just as Gretta is haunted by D’Arcy’s recital.

Gretta and Gabriel leave the party, walking together but separately through the snow covered streets of Dublin looking for a cab. Gretta is in front of Gabriel, chatting with D'Arcy. As they walk, Gabriel's mind brims with a heady mix of thoughts, feelings, and memories. "Thoughts went rioting through his brain, proud, joyful, tender, valorous" (29). Pause for a moment to consider the four terms that the narrator uses to describe Gabriel's "thoughts." What sort of state of mind do they together evoke? Gabriel is puzzled over what he has just seen in his wife, but at this moment, walking through the snowy darkness, if there is a single feeling that most overtakes him, it is a kind of desirous pleasure that intensifies into "lust" and then aggression as the couple reaches the hotel and checks into their room. Why? Why does Gabriel suddenly feel intensely close to Gretta in the aftermath of him seeing her and experiencing her, as it were, *at a distance.* Vivid fragments of memories of their life together, going back to the days before they were married, "burst like stars" in his mind—a love letter, standing together on a railway platform, watching a bottle-maker, a fragment of something he had once written to her. What does Joyce accomplish by having Gabriel have *those* particular memories? How do those memories help in the work of characterization, i.e., in the shaping of Joyce's character and the integration of the story's themes, questions and problems into that character? How do those memories speak to "The Dead's" major themes and questions? The narrator describes the words that Gabriel had once lovingly written to Gretta in a revealing way: "Like distant music these words that he had written years before were borne towards him from the past" (30). *Like distant music*: such an interesting simile to deploy, given the use of the same phrase only a page earlier in the story. Joyce's narrator recovers the phrase that Gabriel had used to name his sentimental painting after Gretta, now putting it to somewhat more capacious use.

Gabriel too is captivated by memories and haunted by the past, in this case, the loving and marital past he has created together with Gretta. What we will soon discover is that Gabriel experiences his memories of Gretta "like distant music," whereas the "distant music" that Gretta experiences doesn't have anything to do with Gabriel, but instead the memories of a lost love from an earlier moment in her life. Do you see what Joyce is doing here, using the same words to describe how each character is undone by the past but undone separately and differently? Gabriel fondly remembers moments with Gretta, memories which he feels draw him closer to her; but Gretta remembers moments—as we will shortly understand—with Michael Fury, memories that insist on an important space of separation between she and her husband. We don't yet know about Michael Fury, and so only observe Gretta from Gabriel's point of view. So Gretta's account of her relationship with Michael Fury will come as a revelation to both Gabriel and *us* as readers. Both of us will need to recalibrate, both of us will need to go back and reassess what was going on when Gabriel watches his wife as they walk along the Dublin streets after the party.

Gabriel and Gretta retire to their hotel room. The power is out and Gabriel asks the night porter to remove the candle. Why? What is the significance of those small details, beyond giving the scene a vivid sense of verisimilitude, i.e. of "realness"? Does Gabriel pefer the darkness to hide something from himself? Or is the darkness a metaphor here for the immense space that he will soon come to see separates him from his wife? One thing is certain: the darkness of the hotel room joins that space to the darkness of the snowy world outside the hotel room. Gabriel's strong erotic feelings for Gretta, building since he saw her on the staircase, now surge into the foreground. "He longed to be master of her strange mood," we are told; "He longed to . . . crush her body against his, to overmaster her" (32). What do you make of this modulation of his passionate desire for Gretta? To long to master "her strange mood" closely links Gretta's distance from her husband—which Gabriel experiences as something unfamiliar—*and* his desire to "overmaster" her. Gabriel experiences Gretta's difference from him as something at once erotic, charged with desire, *and* as something that needs to be colonized and vanquished. We are learning much more about Gabriel than we may have known previously. Gretta tells Gabriel what is on her mind, namely the story of Michael Fury, with whom she might well have once been in love and for whose death she feels responsible. But it is important to note that it isn't the fact that Gretta had this love before Gabriel that is the most unsettling thing about Gretta's story. It is instead what that story *represents*, what it captures all at once for Gabriel--namely that he can never know everything about Gretta and that as close as they are, they love each other across an abyss that cannot be crossed. It may well be that the entire story has been massed to bring us to this understanding: *that love begins not in some imagined communion with the other person but out of the realization that the beloved remains wonderfully and irremissibly different, singular, unique, and other.* And there is more: if we cannot know the other, if we cannot "overmaster" the other, then the same thing must apply to ourselves. We no more know ourselves fully and completely than we know others. And thank goodness for that! Who would want to live in a world in which we were transparent to each other and to ourselves? Gabriel struggles amid his desires for Gretta to come to this understanding, but we as readers are encouraged and expected to understand the larger consequences of Gretta's memory. That's one of the remarkable e things about the worlds of fiction, i.e., that they open up spaces for us to experiment with difficult kinds of knowledge even if the inhabitants of those worlds often find it difficult

to do the same. As Gabriel says to himself, watching Gretta sleep, exhausted from the night's events, it is "as though he and she had never lived together as man and wife." That would be true *only* if living together as man and wife meant that a man possesses his wife, thinking her thoughts and feeling her feelings and sharing her memories. Notice that Gabriel thinks that it is "*as though* he and she had never" lived together "as man and wife." "As though" means that he grasps at some level that they *had* lived together as a married couple; it only *seems* like that had not taken place. Gabriel experiences his love for Gretta in terms of fusing with her, even overtaking her. But listening to her story of Michael Fury, he is faced with an entirely different experience of love, which flourishes not in spite of the separateness of Gretta's and Gabriel's lives but precisely *because* of it. They are alone, together.

Glimpsing himself as a shadowy figure in the mirror, Gabriel is compelled to be hospitable to some difficult thoughts about himself. Hospitality worthy of the name is never uncomplicated or easeful. Having heard Gretta's story, he sees her differently and sees himself differently. "A shameful consciousness of his own person assailed him," the narrator tells us; Gabriel "saw himself as a ludicrous figure . . ." (34). Gabriel goes on to castigate himself in ways that make sense in the context of the story. What's interesting is that although Gabriel sees himself in these terms, we as readers are invited to be a bit more generous. As pitiable as many of Joyce's characters can be in *Dubliners*, Joyce is careful never simply to scoff at them or dismiss them in the way that Gabriel dismisses himself at this moment in "The Dead." The weaknesses and arrogance and empty verbiage of the Irish madden Joyce, but he was wise enough in his fictions to let the Irish characters live their lives and be who they are without simply mocking or abandoning them. Joyce combines a sharp criticism of the Irish and a frankness about their limitations *with* a kind of loving patience with them. That being said, notice that this moment of acute self-consciousness in Gabriel doesn't wash away all his pettiness. He still thinks condescendingly of his friends and family as vulgar compared to his more sophisticated tastes.

Gretta falls asleep and as the story ends, Gabriel himself is almost asleep, moving between waking life and dreaming life, a powerfully generative condition in which, for example, Keats's speaker also finds himself at the end of "Ode to a Nightingale." As consciousness slips away, paradoxically, Gabriel's consciousness expands, widens and proves hospitable to strange new thoughts. Earlier, in his little speech, Gabriel had insisted that he put the dead behind him but now that is neither possible nor desirable. The dead arrive on Gabriel's doorstep, first in the form of Gretta's memories and then, as Gabriel's mind dilates, in the form of shades that appear just beyond the range of normal sight. Gretta's revelation has triggered something in Gabriel, freeing his otherwise tightly scripted imagination to contemplate larger possibilities, larger than his life with Gretta, larger even than the expanded view of his life with Gretta that her revelation has introduced. Gabriel feels himself dissolving. How specifically does Joyce capture that strange experience? Notice too how Gabriel's dissolution here at the end of the story is held in marked tension with the rest of the story, in which his presence, his uniqueness and individuality, is so vividly captured. We are invited to hold the two "Gabriel's" in our head at the same time: the particular one whose characterization has absorbed so much of Joyce's creative energies and the "Gabriel" who, at this concluding moment, threatens to fade into an expanse where even the distinction between the living and the dead threatens to collapse.

The snow falls completely indifferently on both the living and the dead, blanketing both. We see that the snow is finally Joyce's extraordinary metaphor for several different things. --First, the frozen immobility of Dubliners, trapped in the smallness of their ways, awaiting someone like Joyce to release the creativity that he believed was their birthright and indeed the birthright of every human being. Second, the snowy landscape functions as a metaphor for the condition of "negative capability" (as Keats would say), i.e., an expansive openness to difficult thoughts. For it is contemplating the snow and being transported into that cold landscape that Joyce closely associates with the dilation of Gabriel's consciousness. Amid that snowy world, Gabriel becomes someone he might never otherwise be, a person who is—as Keats says in a letter to his brother—"capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." Third, the snow is a figure for the ways in which the living are complexly joined to the dead. The dead join the living by haunting the living. The dead are close by but also at an enormous distance. Joyce may have treated his fictions as a means by which the Irish might secure a different *future*, the first step of which is seeing themselves as if for the first time in those fictions. But he was wise enough to know that there is no future without a past, no present that isn't haunted by the past. The dead and the living are joined too in the lives of Gretta and Gabriel; Gabriel realizes that he has been haunted by a ghost about which he knew nothing during all those years he was married to Gretta. Imagine that: you can be haunted by a ghost you may not yet have met. Whoever Gretta is, whoever she is to Gabriel, she cleaves to the ghost of Michael Fury and all that Michael Fury represents, i.e., her wonderful separateness from Gabriel.

The division between the living and the dead thus functions in "The Dead" as a metaphor for the ways in which the living are separated from each other. Gabriel knows Gretta, he knows about her . . . but he will never know what it is *like to be Gretta*. The falling snow joins the living and the dead and the living with the living, but it also freezes and immobilizes everything in its place, and so functions as a complex metaphor for the separateness of the living from the dead and the living from the living. What a strange thought. The snow joins these worlds, but it also marks a certain limit, marks the fact that, try as we might, we cannot finally grasp others, even dearly loved others, wholly and completely. Gabriel is not and cannot be completely alive to everything that Gretta is, and so, in a sense, some part of her is "dead" to him, "dead" in the sense of being inertly unavailable to his overmastering possession, unavailable even and especially to his deep love for her too. Perhaps that is what it means truly to be in love. We start to see how the title of this short story refers to something more than the dearly departed. *Another way of saying this is that an important part of those we love remains as distant from us as the dead are*. The ones we love are nearby, to be sure. And yet they are *also* far, far away because they are utterly unique and composed of experiences, thoughts, feelings and memories that you will never know and cannot know. Here you might think of the narrator of Alice Munro's short story, "Friend of My Youth." Recall how, at the end of the story, the narrator describes the dream she once had of her mother in which her mother hauntingly returns to her daughter bearing an important message. The message? She, the mother, is "weary" of the daughter's attempts to *overmaster* her: "She is weary . . . of me and my idea of her," the daughter admits to herself, weary of "my information, *my notion that I can know anything about her*" (167). Note how the mother, the memory of the mother is very near, as close to the daughter as her dreams, and yet that same mother patiently and tiredly says to the daughter, in effect, you will never know and can never know me, not really. You and I, she suggests,

remain alone, together. Whatever love they shared in life and whatever love the daughter has for her mother long after her mother dies must be love forged across that immense distance. Both Joyce's Gabriel Conroy and—as Munro's daughter-narrator struggle to see that the distance that divides us from each other is not a bad thing but, quite the opposite, something splendid and indeed life-giving. Thank goodness we remain separate from each other, even when we are with those we love dearly and complicatedly. It is important to let the other person be and to forge loving relationships that let the other person be. Our separateness from each other is not a foil to love but the very thing that makes it possible and lively. These are insights that Joyce's story and Munro's story labour to explore.

We live our lives alone, together. The snow that settles so "thickly" over statues and lonely graveyards, over cities and rivers and plains, the snow that blankets everything and that Joyce gives the honour of last place in "The Dead" is a metaphor too for the *indifference* of the larger universe to our lives, the many ways in which we are left, both on our own and with each other--alone, together--to make of the world what we can make of it. And among the things that we can make is a short story like "The Dead." To see and grasp our aloneness, together, means momentarily seeing ourselves from the distant and indifferent perspective of the snow.