

## FRAMED IMAGES AS COUNTERPOINTS IN JAMES JOYCE'S 'THE DEAD'

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This article aims to analyse the images presented within frames in James Joyce's 'The Dead' as if they were descriptions of works of art, or *ekphrases*. It will be shown that the four main framed images reproduce a certain design established by the initial set, underlying once again the perfect structure as well as the complex intertwining between all the narrative elements of the text. Examining ekphrases involves a symbolic reading of the textual images, often leading to unexpected associations, which, at the same time, reinforce—like counterpoints—central aspects of the story. This analysis has also made it possible to focus on elements usually overlooked by Joycean criticism, such as the waistcoat that Gabriel's mother made for him. Since all the framed images may be considered as exploring and exhibiting Gabriel's inner conflicts, Lacan's psychoanalytic theory has provided an invaluable tool for understanding both the main character's epiphanic experience and the intense dynamics of those around him, including the spectral presences of his mother and Michael Furey. The two ekphrastic descriptions of unframed images—the supper table and the snow—will also be considered.

Keywords: Ekphrasis; framed images; 'The Dead'; Joyce; Lacan; Modernism

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### **IMÁGENES ENMARCADAS COMO CONTRAPUNTOS EN 'LOS MUERTOS', DE JAMES JOYCE**

*Este artículo analiza aquellas imágenes en el cuento 'Los muertos', de Joyce, presentadas dentro de marcos, como si se describiesen obras de arte, o écfrasis. Las cuatro imágenes principales enmarcadas reproducen el patrón establecido en la primera de ellas, resaltando una vez más la perfecta estructura y la compleja interrelación de todos los elementos narrativos del texto. Estudiar las écfrasis implica una lectura simbólica que realza—como contrapuntos—momentos de gran intensidad de la historia y que con frecuencia conduce a asociaciones sorprendentes. Este enfoque posibilitará estudiar elementos que la crítica Joyceana suele pasar por alto, como el chaleco que la madre de Gabriel le confeccionó. Dado que todas las imágenes enmarcadas exploran y revelan los conflictos internos de Gabriel, la teoría psicoanalítica de Lacan resultará una herramienta excelente para comprender tanto la experiencia epifánica del protagonista como el intenso dinamismo de los que le rodean, incluyendo las presencias espectrales de su madre y de Michael Furey. También se hará referencia a dos écfrasis de imágenes que se resisten a ser enmarcadas: la mesa de la cena y la nieve.*

*Palabras clave: Écfrasis; imágenes enmarcadas; Los muertos; Joyce; Lacan; modernismo*

## 1. Introduction

In a core episode of James Joyce's 'The Dead', Gabriel Conroy observes that it is his wife Gretta who is listening on the staircase to Mr Bartell D'Arcy singing 'The Lass of Aughrim'. In amazement at his feeling of estrangement, he tries to come to terms with the awesome sight by rendering the scene into a painting in order to read it symbolically. This is one of several instances in 'The Dead' where an image is shown to the reader as if it were within a frame. On defining *frame*, Ulrich Weisstein quotes the following meaning from the *Webster Collegiate Dictionary*: "a kind of open case or structure made for admitting, enclosing or supporting things like windows, doors or pictures" (Weisstein 2007: 191), but for his analysis of visual arts he reformulates its scope to: "a total or partial enclosure serving as a borderline separating fact from fiction" (2007: 191). Both definitions are relevant for the present essay. The former indicates those instances in 'The Dead' where images are shown as framed, while the latter denotes the literary use of those images within frames which might be interpreted as pieces of visual art, thus separating the factual, realistic world of Gabriel from his mental, psychological progression to the closing epiphany. In fact, all framed images in 'The Dead' refer to Gabriel's psychological operations, which will be commented on following Lacan's psychoanalytic theory.

Framed images function like ekphrastic representations within the narrative. An *ekphrasis* may be defined as a literary description of a visual work of art,<sup>1</sup> enacting therefore diverse intertextual relationships between verbal and visual arts. Although ekphrases were initially explored in poetry, they abound in realistic fiction as well. In this case, when a visual work of art is described in the course of a narration, readers do understand the literal meaning shown by the image, but they may decide to read it symbolically by establishing analogies in order to extract another significance of much deeper insight. As objects of art, paintings generate an aesthetic response in viewers which is felt but cannot be easily verbalized—the "literally unrepresentable", in Krieger's words (1998: 4). It is taken for granted that every painting exhibits referents both figural and ideological, and that the bond between them and the image is indissoluble and unrepeatable. Owing to this, the mere inscription of a framed image within a realist story, the very materiality of the painting, allows the objective integration of the symbol within the mimetic discourse and the activation of the reader's search for analogical meaning. By means of this peculiar way of signification, novelists may digress from the spatio-temporal dimension of characters in order to offer readers a passing glimpse into the complexity of a given subject—ranging from an authorial suggestion about the plot or characters to a transcendental truth—without breaking the illusion of reality. Like symbols, ekphrases are subject to a multiplicity of interpretations, since each new reader may produce a new interpretation by establishing new analogies. Romantic philosophers and writers were fascinated by the properties of symbols—by their capacity to reach the universal from the particular, by their participation with the idea symbolized, or by their elusive, unattainable meaning. This Romantic exploration of the transcendental quality of symbols to convey significance at different levels of abstraction reached an apotheosis in the literature of Joyce (Schneidau 1969: 81).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> An in-depth discussion on the definition of *ekphrasis* is offered in Robillard (1998). See also Heffernan (1993).

<sup>2</sup> Joyce brought to prose fiction the quality of poetry that Ezra Pound later preached in his imagist revolution.

Critics have frequently warned of the complexity that lurks beyond the apparent simplicity of *Dubliners*. Particularly in 'The Dead', Joyce's crowning masterpiece in the short story genre, both chronologically and aesthetically, he contrived an intricate tapestry of significance whereby any thread of interpretation glimmers, disappears or blends at different points with any other of its myriad threads, only to converge in the epiphanic experience of Gabriel. 'The Dead', too, may be compared to the complex geometry of a finely cut gem, whose facets mirror and reflect each other's brilliant and suggestive luminosity. The web of meanings—symbolic, intertextual and literal—intertwined in 'The Dead' justifies the use of *counterpoints* in the title above. In music, *counterpoint* is the technique of adding two or more melodies to a given melody in order to effect a harmonious combination, while each melody maintains its own independent tune. The notion of counterpoint has inspired the analysis of framed images in 'The Dead' which are variously described at key events throughout the story. Like counterpoints in music, framed images both reinforce and broaden the significance of the event in the storyline where they are inset, and interconnect with other meaningful nodes in the narrative structure. Besides, the 'thread' of framed images forms a consistent sequence throughout the short story. Its progression can be perceived on and off until the final epiphanic scene, developing from more visual to more subtle modes of both inseting these ekphrases in the narration and generating their frames. As a modernist text—or rather as a transitional text between realism and modernism—"The Dead" contains unframed images which also function within the narrative like true ekphrases. These will likewise be considered.

Refinement of style and penetrating sincerity are the chief pillars upon which Joyce's first presentation of Dublin from exile is sustained. The narration of 'The Dead' unfolds in classical simplicity. Its pace progresses, as observed by Beck, like "an adagio with no gesture either hurried or superfluous" (1969: 304). Joyce's economic use of language exhibits a contrived exercise of intertextuality, not only by explicit references to many literary and musical pieces or by a natural welding of symbols and figures of speech in realist prose fiction, but also by subtle echoes to other texts, notably to the Gospels (Cf. Quinn 1999/2000). The short story was written in Trieste in 1907, and was later added to the first version of *Dubliners*, already drafted in Dublin, but concluded in Trieste in 1905. Joyce's view of Ireland from his European exile differed in form, depth and intention from the preceding stories in the collection. By this time, his conception of Dublin as a centre of paralysis had been counterbalanced by his acknowledgement of certain Irish virtues—hospitality in particular—of which he could not see much on the continent. Like Gabriel, who mentioned in his after-supper speech the qualities "of humanity, of hospitality, of kindly humour" (Joyce 1969: 203), Joyce too might have recalled vivid fond memories of Dublin. In fact, research has shown that he relied extensively on authentic and autobiographical material for this story, ranging from his correspondence with his wife Nora to the actual snowy weather conditions. Through scenes of conviviality, he created a microcosm of Irish society. The characters' commentaries and dialogues build up a polyphony that grounds and illuminates Gabriel's epiphanic experience, as his self is confronted with love and death—probably the two essential matters in literature as well as in life.

It is paradoxical that a story entitled 'The Dead', covering a period of a few hours during a snowy evening near the feast of Epiphany, so noticeably abounds with sensuous images. Joyce adorned his tale with visual images from the opening word, Lily, the assistant girl's name. Furthermore, other images are also prominent, such as the warm atmosphere at the Misses Morkans', the magnificent supper, the music, dancing, singing or

the lively dialogue, coming to die out in the final scene, when in the darkness of the night only “the snow falling faintly through the universe” (1969: 224) remains.

## 2. Outlining the conflict: The first instance of framed images

At the beginning of the central section of ‘The Dead’, when Gabriel’s cousin Mary Jane skilfully executes a piano piece which he utterly rejects, he focuses his attention on two pictures hanging on the wall above the piano. One shows the balcony scene of *Romeo and Juliet* while the other represents Edward and Richard, the two princes murdered in the Tower of London. A photograph of Gabriel’s late mother, Ellen, with his brother Constantine can also be seen before the pier-glass. Gabriel wears glasses and the narrator indicates that his eyes are suffering from irritation as a consequence of the glittering waxed floor, as if alerting us about these visual signs, whose symbolic meaning Gabriel is doubly unable to grasp.

The two pictures made in red, blue and brown wools by Aunt Julia Morkan in her schooldays introduce the ideas of tragic fate, untimely deaths and impossible love. Margot Norris has discussed at length how the balcony scene prefigures a similar one when Gabriel observes his wife listening to ‘The Lass of Aughrim’ (Norris 1989: 492-93). It also adumbrates the last scene, when Gretta tells her husband of Michael Furey, a young man in Galway she used to go out with, and how the night before she departed for the convent he stood in the garden in the rain, saying that he did not want to live. But when the pictures are shown, the reader may only anticipate some tragic event in the *dénouement*, reminiscent of Shakespeare, maybe in relation to Lily, whose name opens the story and whose experience in love seems to have already been quite negative. However, the reader’s expectation will soon be shifted towards Gabriel when, on noticing the photograph of his mother, he recalls how she opposed his marriage to Gretta.

The photo, which gives Ellen a spectral presence at the party, is concisely described: “She [Ellen] held an open book on her knees and was pointing out something in it to Constantine who, dressed in a man-o’-war suit, lay at her feet” (Joyce 1969: 186). The image recalls the iconography of Saint Anne teaching the infant Virgin Mary to read, with the difference that Mary is standing. Constantine’s lying at his mother’s feet denotes a certain pet-like attitude of reverence and submission to her.<sup>3</sup> Ellen is depicted as a dominant and matronly woman, in binary opposition to artistically talented Aunt Julia, who considered her sister the brain carrier of the family. Whereas Gabriel’s father is mentioned only in passing as “T. J. Conroy of the Port and Docks” (1969: 179), as if to indicate the social position of the family by mentioning his job (maybe in the administration), it was his mother who undertook her sons’ education and professional qualification with determination, and it was also she who chose their names.

This latter piece of information becomes crucial for two main reasons. First, it underlines Ellen’s influence on Gabriel, as she assumed a role reserved for the father in a patriarchal society. In terms of Lacan’s theory of the three orders, she (like mothers in general) is identified as an active agent of the Symbolic, of the Other—with a capital O—representing language, culture and the Law. For Lacan, a child enters the Symbolic order,

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<sup>3</sup> It also emphasizes Ellen’s ascendancy in the family. Lorenzo Chiesa says that, for Lacan, “the mother considers the ‘totality’ of the child as her imaginary phallus”, and quotes Lacan immediately afterwards: “the child as a whole is involved” (2007: 69).

which is a thoroughly alienating realm, when he or she identifies symbolically with the father and, thus, internalizes the Law as the final step in resolving the Oedipus complex (Chiesa 2007: 65). Gabriel's absence in the photo denotes a deficiency in his process of fully entering the Symbolic—either a reluctance to be counselled and to obey, or a lack in personal skills for social or sexual interaction. Secondly, by adding that Ellen chose her sons' names, Joyce alerts readers to the meaning of his characters' names and invites us to reconsider those already mentioned in the story so far.

The combination of *Ellen* and *Constantine*, which are those names textually closer to this statement, immediately evoke Constantine, the Roman Emperor under whose reign the Christian faith was officially tolerated, and his mother, Saint Helena, who is reputed to have found the relics of the Holy Cross, on which Jesus Christ was crucified. In stark contrast to the Roman lineage, Gabriel bears the Biblical name of the Archangel known as the Messenger of God. It was Saint Gabriel who announced to Mary that her womb would be blessed with her divine maternity, and it will be he, too, who will announce the second coming of Christ in eschatological times. Therefore, it is suggested that Constantine possesses the pragmatic and the military qualities of Roman society, while Gabriel is, rather, imbued with the spiritual and the theocratic qualities of Judeo-Christian cultures. Instead of a capacity for facing the battles of life successfully,<sup>4</sup> he felt inclined to the creative or artistic aspects of life, like Aunt Julia. This difference is emphasized by the man-o'-war outfit that Constantine wears in contrast to Gabriel's waistcoat, which his mother made for him as a birthday present. He recalls the waistcoat when he realizes Mary Jane's talent for music and wonders why his mother was not blessed with such skills.

Although the waistcoat is an image that comes to Gabriel's consciousness, it is described as if it were an ekphrasis in the central part of the paragraph, between Aunt Julia's pictures and the photograph, thus giving the impression of another framed image: "one year his mother had worked for him as a birthday present a waistcoat of purple tabinet, with little foxes' heads upon it, lined with brown satin and having round mulberry buttons" (Joyce 1969: 186). Despite its interpretative potentiality, the waistcoat has generally been overlooked by the critics. However, it turns out to be a highly symbolic object that requires a careful analysis to better understand the psychological constitution of Joyce's character, as well as the elements at play in the closing epiphanic experience.

The waistcoat may be figuratively interpreted as a protective shield. Its purple colour strikes one as uncommon for a boy's garment, beautiful as it might have been. It is only when the association of Constantine with the Roman Emperor is established that its symbolism emerges in its full and ambiguous dimension. Because purple was attached to imperial dignity, Gabriel's waistcoat becomes a motherly compensation for those qualities with which he was not naturally endowed. Constitutionally he belongs to Biblical culture, in which purple evokes the *Ecce Homo*—Jesus Christ shown to the people of Israel after having been scourged and crowned with thorns by the Roman soldiers. In traditional Christian iconography, purple is attributed to the 'Nazarene'—Jesus Christ carrying his cross on his way to Calvary. Thus, Gabriel becomes what he announces<sup>5</sup> and, therefore, must endure his personal passion. Nevertheless, it can be misleading to dissociate the character from the Angel of the Annunciation and to establish a parallelism exclusively with the passion of Christ. In the Catholic Church, purple is the liturgical colour of both

<sup>4</sup> As is suggested in his manifold confrontations with women throughout the story and in Gretta's praise of his generosity with others.

<sup>5</sup> In some Christian countries it is blasphemous to name a child after Jesus.

Advent and Lent (except in the third Sunday of Advent and the fourth of Lent, when it is pink). Like Lent, Advent signifies a spiritual preparation for Christmas time, which—from the Nativity to the Epiphany—starts the core phase of God’s plan of salvation which culminates in the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ at Easter time, when the liturgical colour, as well as at Christmas, is white, like snow.

Just as the time of Advent prefigures the Easter passion, little Gabriel’s purple waistcoat adumbrates his sacrificial tribulation in adulthood, when he will bitterly admit his personal failure as a husband, and, consequently, as a man. This is reinforced by the waistcoat’s decoration of little foxes’ heads. This type of mimicry, aiming like a *trompe l’oeil* to deceive the eye, is one of the examples used by Lacan to explain his idea of the gaze. In ‘The Eye and the Gaze’, he analyses the Freudian concept of *nucleus*—this is something that belongs to the pre-conscious and exists in relation to the unconscious, and governs for example the subject’s syntax and speech. In this sense, the little foxes’ heads perform the function of Lacan’s notion of gaze by making ‘the eye slip’ as it looks at Gabriel’s problematic nucleus. As Lacan explains in his definition of the gaze, “something slips, passes, is transmitted, from state to stage, and is always to some degree eluded in it—that is what we call the gaze” (1994: 73). In his conclusion, Lacan affirms that the gaze contains the *object a*, which is where the subject falls and this fall remains unperceived: “In so far as the gaze, *qua object a*, may come to symbolize this central lack expressed in the phenomenon of castration, and in so far as it is an *object a* reduced, of its nature, to a punctiform, evanescent function, it leaves the subject in ignorance as to what there is beyond the appearance” (1994: 77). Given the ambiguity that the purple colour generates, the little foxes’ heads on the waistcoat become an external symbol to deceive the viewer’s ‘eye’ regarding the deficiency of Gabriel’s ego. The reason Joyce chose the fox may be explained either as an iconic variation for children of the she-wolf that suckled Romulus and Remus, or as the opposite animal in the pair to the one represented, which, in the context of Advent and Christmas, cannot be other than the lamb. Therefore, wildness, endurance or valour, and subtlety or cunning, qualities usually associated with masculinity, are lacking in Gabriel’s ego; instead, he is defined by the qualities of domesticity (with his children), shyness (with women, in particular with his wife) and generosity (towards whom he considers socially lower, such as Lily, Freddy Malins or his Aunts).

Another significant element of Gabriel’s waistcoat is the lining in brown satin. Joyce’s choice of brown is not arbitrary. In the same paragraph we are told that Aunt Julia worked the pictures “in red, blue and brown wools” (Joyce 1969: 186). Brown is not a primary colour, as yellow is; and, on the whole, it is hard to imagine how the three colours can produce the effects of light and shadow to make the pictures worth being hung above the piano. Either there are two tones—dark and light—for each one of the three colours, or they are rather light, to create pictorial effects. In any case, as a substitute for yellow as a primary colour in the pictures, this brown hue would not differ much from orange, but ‘orange’, which symbolizes the Irish Protestant community, is not registered in ‘The Dead’ as a colour, but as a fruit. It can be argued that brown is metonymically used to represent Protestantism, not so much as an integral component of Irish identity, but as a direct reference to the English, foreign culture. The only non-Catholic guest at the party, who belongs to “the other persuasion” (Joyce 1969: 194), is precisely called Mr. Browne, whose “very low Dublin accent” (Joyce 1969: 183) speaks for the small degree of authorial esteem towards what he represents (though it is counterbalanced by the fact that he wears a green coat, the Irish colour for the Catholic community). The pictures of the balcony scene and the Tower, related to Shakespeare—and, more widely, to English literature,

history and imagination—are artificially worked with brown wool. Gabriel's waistcoat lined in brown satin, then, denotes his English-oriented education, which he cultivated to the point of writing a weekly literary column for the anglophile newspaper *The Daily Express*. At the party, Gabriel was worried about quoting or not quoting Robert Browning in his speech, whose poetry he had recently reviewed. Given the association of brown with England, and although Joyce himself admired and wrote about Browning, he becomes representative of any English writer, as well as Gabriel's cultural isolation in the Dublin milieu, or in other words his contempt for Irish cultural values.

While Gabriel looks at the photo of his mother, we are told: "A shadow passed over his face as he remembered her sullen opposition to his marriage" (Joyce 1969: 187). This passage has been interpreted as the resurrection of Ellen's ghost because "the conflict had never been resolved" (O Hehir 1957: 6); but, when it is read literally,<sup>6</sup> it becomes apparent that Joyce created a brilliant ambiguity that provides one of the most extraordinary examples of *anamorphosis*, as analysed by Lacan in connection with Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors*. Lacan was fascinated by the skull depicted in a distorted perspective that crosses the picture, and that the viewer can make sense of only as he looks at it on leaving the room sideways. The distorted skull is simply a graphic model of the shadow which, caused by no material object, passes over Gabriel's face. Lacan identifies the skull with "the subject as annihilated—annihilated in the form that is, strictly speaking, the imaged embodiment of the ... castration" (1994: 88-89), a phenomenon related to the subject's acceptance of the Symbolic order and Law. By one of the most ambiguous and elusive of words, *shadow*, Joyce represents the unrepresentable: the subject's conflict, which Lacan situates in the order of the Real, where the *object a* and the gaze belong (Lacan 1994: 83). The effects of the gaze on the subject are again explained in 'What Is a Picture?': "the gaze is the instrument through which light is embodied and through which ... I am *photo-graphed*" (Lacan 1994: 106; italics in the original), Lacan corrects the impression that his statement has nothing to do with representation, but with "something that establishes a fracture, a bi-partition, a splitting of the being to which the being accommodates itself" (1994: 106). Gabriel's resentment against his mother for her opposition to his marriage and for speaking of Gretta as "being country cute" (Joyce 1969: 187) evinces an unresolved conflict in his unconscious. This conflict emerges when he looks at her photograph. Gabriel's face becomes the screen, the mask where his inner conflict negotiates with the gaze of his mother, who, in assuming the patriarchal role, represents the order of the Symbolic, as commented above. 'The Dead' is about the resolution of this conflict.

Yet one more aspect must be considered with regard to Ellen's name, this time in relation to Helen of Troy, since Gabriel has decided to illustrate his speech with an allusion to the Judgement of Paris and his award of the Golden Apple. The award candidates are his two aunts and cousin, referred to as the "Three Graces of the Dublin musical world" (Joyce 1969: 204), though they are especially praised for their hospitality. Significantly, Ellen is no longer living to complete the trio of the Morkan sisters. She is said to have had no talent for music, but her vacancy is occupied by her only niece Mary Jane, who was playing—almost as in trance—a virtuoso piece at the piano, while Gabriel looked at the pictures and the photograph. Introduced by the narrator as "the main prop of the household" (Joyce 1969: 176) and later described by Gabriel as "talented, cheerful,

<sup>6</sup> The word *literally* is problematic in 'The Dead'. The opening sentence of the short story, "Lily, the caretaker's daughter, was literally run off her feet" (Joyce 1969: 175), suggests from the very beginning a conflation between literal and figurative meaning.

hard-working and the best of nieces” (1969: 205), Mary Jane—whose name echoes the third word of Christ on the Cross—seems to embody every quality Ellen wanted for her son, instead of defiant, impetuous and impassioned Gretta.

The set of two pictures, the waistcoat and the photograph constitutes a unity that reveals Gabriel’s psychological topography. This first instance of framed images signposts the core matter of the story and—very significantly for the purpose of this article—establishes the literary pattern of the other three framed images to be particularly highlighted. But before dealing with the second, it is worth commenting on two minor framed images, because there will be two similar ones in the latter part of the story.

Just after the incident with Miss Ivors and Gretta’s suggestion that he was the right husband for Mrs Malins, Gabriel walks to the window and, in his mental agony, wishes to be outside in the cold and the snow: “The snow would be lying on the branches of the trees and forming a bright cap on the top of the Wellington Monument. How much more pleasant it would be there than at the supper-table!” (Joyce 1969: 192). The window frames a sight that comforts Gabriel. It offers, as Daniel Schwarz has pointed out, a view to “a kind of psychic utopia” (1994: 112). Indeed, it functions as a mirror that reflects Gabriel’s specular image. Lacan’s mirror-stage theory explains the subject’s process of self-individuation as ego, when he identifies himself with an ideal image: the *ideal ego*.<sup>7</sup> Gabriel’s image of his ideal ego emanates from what the phallic monument to Wellington represents.<sup>8</sup> At the window he revises again the chief points of his speech, all of them concerned with foreign, non-Irish issues. His complete identification with the specular sight is narcissistically enhanced at the moment of uttering his speech. Gabriel envisions the gaze of the imaginary other—the *ideal ego* of the mirror—upon himself, as he imagines that people outside might be listening to the waltz being played and looking up to the lighted windows envious of those at the party (where he is about to speak), and even that “the Wellington Monument wore a gleaming cap of snow that flashed westward over the white field of the Fifteen Acres” (Joyce 1969: 202). Gabriel’s imagination reverses the focus of interest. Lacan relates this aggressive tension with narcissism, as “the subject both erotizes and vies with his own image, since it constitutes the ideal perfection which the subject does not have” (Chiesa 2007: 20). Gabriel’s narcissistic ego vies with his mirror image, as shown by the window frame, and fancies substituting his ideal ego represented by the Wellington Monument in particular. This second image of a window frame serves as a counterpoint to round off Gabriel’s psychological portrait when he stands up to deliver his speech. He enters the order of the Symbolic, in full command to impart his culture to those present at the party, but ignorant that this very portrait of his is soon bound to be shattered into pieces.

A chief point in Gabriel’s speech, as well as in ‘The Dead’, is hospitality—“the tradition of genuine warm-hearted courteous Irish hospitality” (1969: 203). In the central segment of the text, Joyce indulges in detailing the richness and variety—in both food and colour—of the dinner table that, as Schwarz has observed, “is described as if it were a still life” (1994: 115). Vincent Pecora has accurately remarked that the supper table “would

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<sup>7</sup> Lacan develops his theory of the mirror stage to explain the process by which the child, born in absolute helplessness, identifies himself with the image in the mirror to overcome his disadaptation. Though this image is alienating and fragmentary, the individual finds his model in this *Imago* of the ideal-ego. In the ‘The Dead’, the party at the Misses Morkans’ is also alienating for Gabriel, who is relieved by the contemplation of Dublin and the Wellington Monument, all covered by snow.

<sup>8</sup> Despite being a Dubliner, Wellington kept Ireland under an absolutely conservative English rule.

have raised mixed emotions from anyone who could have remembered the famine" (1989: 227); but of all the food referred to, the characters have only slices of goose, ham and beef with some potatoes—not many (we are told that Lily reserved some for Gabriel to eat after carving the goose)—and pudding for dessert with jelly or jam. The disparity between what is shown and what is eaten turns the description of the supper table into an ekphrasis, as if it were a painting that resists framing.<sup>9</sup> By this technique, Joyce creates a fresh icon of Irish hospitality, free of the extensive code of symbolic connotations developed by the great seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European masters.

### 3. From estrangement to irony: The central framed images

Almost at the beginning of the third quarter of the text, when the party is already over and the guests are leaving, Gabriel catches sight of his wife on the staircase listening to Mr Bartell D'Arcy singing 'The Lass of Aughrim'. Since the body of his wife stands in the darkness, he does not recognize her immediately. In a vain attempt to capture the "synesthetic whole" (San Juan 1972: 227) of the vision, Gabriel tries to turn it into a picture in order to read it symbolically, and thinks he would call the picture *Distant Music* if he were a painter. This is the second of the principal framed images in 'The Dead'. Its centrality has been stressed by Epifanio San Juan, who affirms that this is "the 'epiphanic' moment ..., the latter self-disillusionment being an elaborate continuation" (1972: 227). Although this instant involves both Gretta and Gabriel, the authorial point of view focuses only on the male character. In this sense, Margot Norris has attempted an intertextual reading of this 'woman as *object of art*' in relation to Browning and Ibsen in order to explore "the brutalization that the idealization of female beauty can produce and conceal" (1989: 485); whereas Garry Leonard has applied a Lacanian perspective to explain that: "Gretta is Gabriel's symptom; something which, ... if he could only hear it, would complete him. The symptom emits something of infinite value, yet is indecipherable—like distant music" (1991: 465).

The structural elements of the first and second framed images present a strong parallelism, but with significant variations. In the same way that Joyce drew the reader's attention to names, now he asks us to discern symbols. Whereas Gabriel looked at the wall because he disliked the piano piece that his cousin was playing, now Gretta is captivated by Mr D'Arcy's interpreting an Irish song, 'The Lass of Aughrim', in his hoarse voice, as she is reminded of the late Michael Furey, who used to sing it when they were together in Galway, and, like the wool pictures anticipating frustrated love and untimely death, the lyrics allude to a solitary love in the rain.

As soon as Gabriel's psychological narrative portrait is concluded, just before he delivers his speech, he assumes the role of the patriarch. He now represents what Lacan calls the order of the Symbolic, like language, the Law and culture. But as a patriarch, Gabriel's ideal-ego is confronted with Gretta as an ego-ideal. In Chiesa's words: "if the ideal ego is the projection of the ego's ideal image onto the external world ..., the ego-ideal is the subject's introjection of another external image that has a *new* (de)formative effect on his psyche" (2007: 22; emphasis in the original). Lacan places the ego-ideal in the

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<sup>9</sup> The practice of modernist fiction will abandon the technique of describing significant objects within frames in order to be interpreted symbolically. Modernist novelists, instead, will place these objects as part of the narrative world. This is the case with the Marabar Caves in Forster's *A Passage to India*, or with the Lighthouse in Virginia Woolf's novel.

field of the Other, either as narcissistic identification, or as *object a* (Lacan 1994: 256-57). Gabriel feels his role as patriarch threatened by his wife's embodiment of a new signifier, since he cannot recognize her by her face, but by her dress, because her head remains in the dark area of the staircase. As Garry Leonard has suggested, Gretta is for Gabriel the *object a*. He does not gain feedback from the object of his gaze. His wife has escaped from the frame he has built up in his daily married life, from the Symbolic order, and, as symptom, as *object a*, Gretta has entered the order of the Real (for Gabriel, she is now an enigma, she is indecipherable, she has moved outside language). In this sense, Epifanio San Juan has correctly argued that the epiphanic moment occurs here. Gabriel, by asking a rhetorical question about the symbol of what he is seeing, tries to occupy the voyeuristic place of the reader's gaze to see himself seeing Gretta. With her head invisible in the dark, she seems to plunge into the world of the dead; meanwhile, the repressed memory of Michael Furey emerges from her unconscious, like the sudden shadow that passed over Gabriel's face while looking at the photograph of his mother. Gretta's psychological rupture, conflict or satisfaction becomes visible in her skirt as its colours are also distorted by a shadow: "the terracotta and salmonpink panels of her skirt which the shadow made appear black and white" (Joyce 1969: 209). The fading away into black and white reflects a correlative estrangement between Gabriel and Gretta. Joyce may have suggested the reason for this division in the light and dark colours of her skirt. Pink, in the Catholic liturgy, is worn on the third Sunday of Advent as the resulting mixture of the penitential purple with the forthcoming festive white of Christmas. Salmon refers to nature and wilderness; but, read retrospectively, salmonpink hints at Gretta's happiness in Galway. Terracotta cannot be identified with a specific colour, but with a range of ochre hues resulting from fired clay. The significant element is not the colour but the Italian root of the word, which means 'baked earth', as if recalling Michael's passionate love for her. When the song is over, Gretta remains silent, as if absent-minded, and the narrator stresses the passion glowing in her by describing her hair under the gaslight (Michael was employed in the gasworks): "the flame of the gas lit up the rich bronze of her hair" (Joyce 1969: 212), as well as the shining in her eyes and the "colour on her cheeks" (Joyce 1969: 212), signs whose cause is totally misinterpreted by Gabriel.

The section in 'The Dead' when Gabriel and Gretta leave the Morkans' for their hotel has attracted little critical attention. This short episode significantly shows Gabriel outside roofed spaces covered by snow, both real and symbolic. Now Gabriel's spatial position is above the snow. This dynamics of snow throughout 'The Dead' both reinforces and problematizes its symbolic function, especially considering the esoteric appropriation of the higher angelic beings, by means of which Michael is usually associated with the element of fire, represented by his sword of fire, whereas Gabriel is associated with water, for he announced to Mary her maternity (Cf. Walzl 1966: 24). As long as Gabriel walks on the snow (albeit in his galoshes), his mood changes correspondingly. He is no longer oppressed by the alienating role that he had to fulfil socially for both the hostesses and the guests at the party. Instead, in absolute command of his realm, he feels revived and sexually invigorated. His lust at contemplating Gretta's erect figure is increased by the emotion of tenderness at recalling early memories of their life together. It is in this context that the third principal framed image occurs:

He was standing with her in the cold, looking in through a grated window at a man making bottles in a roaring furnace. It was very cold. Her face, fragrant in the cold air, was quite close to his; and suddenly she called out to the man at the furnace:

- Is the fire hot, sir?

But the man could not hear her with the noise of the furnace. It was just as well. He might have answered rudely. (1969: 213)

In this third image there is a progression towards abstraction. While the first images were enclosed by real frames, and the second was a real sight turned into a painting, this time the image framed is the result of Gabriel's mental elaboration. As in the second case, it requires the cooperation of the reader, because the effect of framing is not explicitly described by the narrator. It emerges only if the reader adopts the viewpoint of the bottle maker and attempts what our bottle maker doesn't do: to visualize the smiling couple behind the grated window. The other elements in the pattern of these images are present in this one, too. The music has become the monotone noise of the furnace and the narrator makes readers guess the man's reply to Gretta's question, thus alerting them to omissions and never-revealed statements.

Seen from the viewpoint from which the bottle maker is working, Gabriel and Gretta resemble two prisoners on the cold side, illustrative of their marriage. Whereas he obviously felt at ease, it is Gretta who suddenly asks an inappropriate question—"Is the fire hot, sir?"—perhaps in a veiled evocation of her marital dissatisfaction, and of her husband's emotional or sexual coldness. At the same time, since furnace and fire are needed to make terracotta, what they see from the grated window suggests the increasing energy unleashed when 'The Lass of Aughrim' is sung. Ironically, Gabriel is unaware of the deep sense denoted by the image that his own memory and sexual arousal have generated. Gretta's passionate character is contrasted with Gabriel's milder one, as he compares his memories of their life together with—a rather dim—"tender fire of stars" (Joyce 1969: 213). This double-sided framed image insinuates Gretta's unsatisfactory experience with both lover and husband, and also envisages what Garry Leonard has identified—following Lacan—as the *aphanasis* of Gabriel: "When Gretta says of Michael Furey 'I think he died for me', Gabriel feels his subjectivity fading out altogether" (1991: 467).

The second half also contains two minor framed images which reproduce the same pattern consisting of first showing the image itself and, later on, its transformation by Gabriel's imagination. Just at the beginning of Gretta's confession, which readily confirms that she felt disquieted, Gabriel catches a passing full-length glimpse of himself in the cheval-glass and is puzzled by his own reflection. If, in the first half, the window framed a view of Dublin under snow that soothed Gabriel's soul, now his own reflection generates the opposite feeling. As shown above, the initial framed images symbolically delineated his weaknesses and conflicts, but these latter images aim at portraying his epiphanic crisis of self-awareness: everything converges to exhibit the traumatic eclipse of his ego. Therefore, when Gretta gains control of her speech, his ideal ego vanishes only to behold his pure physiognomy, devoid of the idealising glamour he has built up, thus cutting off the narcissistic bond between Gabriel as subject and his ego, which was emphasized by his imaginary external view of the window before delivering his speech after the supper. As Gretta proceeds with her account, Gabriel feels deeply humiliated when he learns that Michael was simply a boy in the gasworks. It is at this moment that he is able to articulate a reading of his own reflection that so much puzzled him: "A shameful consciousness of his own person assailed him. He saw himself as a ludicrous figure, acting as a pennyboy for his aunts, a nervous well-meaning sentimentalist, orating to vulgarians and idealizing his own clownish lusts, the pitiable fatuous fellow he had caught a glimpse of in the

mirror” (Joyce 1969: 219-20). Walzl’s words synthesize what many critics have observed: “he now identifies himself with the social group that he has secretly despised” (1966: 25) and in particular with Lily. In his comment on this passage, Riquelme stresses the idea of emptiness in connection with this new image of Gabriel (1991: 497), and indeed Gabriel’s emptiness (and humiliation) echoes the kenosis of Christ—a term to refer to His full life as a man (including birth and death) while being a divine person.

#### 4. Attempting to frame the Real: The concluding image

In the final scene, Gretta occupies the order of the Symbolic. She becomes the page of the book that Gabriel’s mother was reading to Constantine and provides Aunt Julia’s wool pictures with an alternative interpretation. Furthermore, she brings forth a new signifier—Michael Furey. The emergence of Michael as an ideal lover annihilates Gabriel as generous husband (or embodiment of the phallus). In the climax of his self-awareness, Gabriel painfully realizes that “he had never felt like that himself towards any woman but he knew that such a feeling must be love” (1969: 223). His passion—unlike Christ’s, which showed love towards humanity—is precisely to acknowledge the full extent of love. In the epilogue, he equally undergoes a sort of descent into hell as he lies half asleep beside Gretta in bed, and also a sort of resurrection as he is awakened by a new snowfall. It is in this context that the fourth principal framed image appears and is preceded by a complex sequence of other images.

Almost at the end of her account, Gretta recalls that the night before she left Galway, she heard “gravel thrown up against the window” (Joyce 1969: 221), but she could not see what it was because the window was very wet. She came downstairs and went to the back of the house only to see “the poor fellow at the end of the garden, shivering” (1969: 221) in the rain. Interestingly enough, framed images in “The Dead” reinforce only the steps in the development of Gabriel’s character—not Gretta’s. By leaving unframed Gretta’s sight of Michael shivering in the rain, Joyce prevents an interpretation of Michael as an ekphrasis. Instead, he is shown as the object of Gretta’s desire, her lover. Jackson Rice has argued that the penultimate paragraph of “The Dead” shows a subliminal vision of Gabriel while falling asleep (1991: 401). In this liminal state of awareness, and haunted by his spectral rival, Gabriel “imagined he saw the form of a young man standing under a dripping tree” (Joyce 1969: 223). The image is, however, ambivalent. On the one hand, water (rain)—associated with Gabriel—both accelerated Michael’s death and swept away his memory from Gretta’s consciousness. But, on the other hand, there is a hope that warmth (fire, heat)—associated with Michael—will soften and melt Gabriel’s inner conflict, which is mirrored by the snow and the landscape of paralysis. Gabriel’s process of coming to terms with the new signifier (Michael) produces a corresponding process of self maturation. We are never told that this process is satisfactorily concluded. However, the fact that Gabriel generates in his imagination a vision provoked by Gretta’s account suggests an inner transformation, since he is learning to accept the other, the rival, the new signifier in his consciousness.<sup>10</sup>

Like the gravel on Gretta’s window, Gabriel is awakened by “a few light taps upon the pane” (Joyce 1969: 223). The noise of the furnace has subdued to the softest of sounds. In

<sup>10</sup> In Lacan’s theory, the castration of the subject implies the successful overcoming of the Oedipus complex, which is a necessary process for entrance into the Symbolic and acceptance of the Law.

his metaphoric resurrection, Gabriel looks at the window and sees that it has started to snow again. The window frames the image of the snowfall, which—as Jackson Rice has shown—is projected over the wall of the hotel room (1991: 401). The framed snowfall conveys the crisis of his ego, a crisis which adumbrates a new Gabriel, overshadowed by the young man under a dripping tree, devoid of any trace of paralysing snow. In this fourth principal framed image, attention is drawn to the snow in chaotic motion. The resolution of his crisis, thus, is left open to speculation. This seems to be the narrator's riddle for the fourth image, as well as for the short-story as a whole. The snowstorm fills the airy space associated with the living, as opposed to the ground space associated with the past and the dead. Throughout 'The Dead', snow becomes a dynamic phenomenon. It sticks on galoshes, it covers the surface of Dublin, it paves the streets on which the characters walk, and, in the closing paragraph, it both externalizes Gabriel's prospective rebirth after his crisis and covers the whole surface of Ireland in such a transcendental, cosmic manner as to map a paralysed space to be left behind, associated with his dead past and his former ideal ego.

Like the description of the supper table in the middle part of the story, snow in 'The Dead' is also an unframed image—or, rather, the overall unframed image—meant to be interpreted as if it were an ekphrasis. Throughout the story, snow evokes Gabriel's profoundest conflicts, his psychological dimension of the (Lacanian) Real, those regions of the mind that escape language and, therefore, can never be verbalized. Snow functions as an external manifestation of Gabriel's inner psychological processes and demands the appropriate interpretation in the precise context where and as it occurs. Snow shows the itinerary of the individual, from his initial discovery of his specular image in the view of Dublin towards a self-questioning that leads to a concluding crisis and the prospect of its overcoming. This is suggested by the reminder of the eschatological and symbolized by the boundless white of the cosmic snowfall, the liturgical colour of both Christ's Nativity and Resurrection.

This study has shown the different strategies put into practice by Joyce to present objects and characters within frames, so that they are turned into images to be read as ekphrases and interpreted as pictorial art. Although the mode of framing varies from one image to another, they constitute a coherent sequence in the complex structure of 'The Dead'. This sequence advances from more figurative to more abstract images, always combined with an acoustic background and an indication to the reader about a specific aspect of the story itself. Like counterpoints in music, the framed images both enhance and supplement instants of great emotional intensity in the story. They render in symbolic visual language Gabriel's psychological landscape and the problems of his married life, therefore ironically hinting at coded clues that will substantiate the understanding of the epiphany. As seen, Lacan's psychoanalytic theory sheds light upon the dynamics and factors convening in Gabriel's epiphanic experience. In particular, it was extremely useful in identifying Gabriel's conflict when the spectral presence of Ellen was dominating the realm of the Symbolic, and to explain the breakdown of his ideal ego when Gretta occupied the Symbolic by bringing forth Michael Furey as a new signifier. Finally, attention has also been drawn to those images in 'The Dead', such as snow, which could be read as ekphrases, though unframed, anticipating thus a technique characteristic of modernist fiction.

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