



VOLUME VIII, ISSUE II

THE UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH JOURNAL
UCMERCED



Irish Literature as means to Combat England's Colonial Influence, in Ireland

Manivone Sayasone

University of California,

Merced

Authors note

Questions and comments can be addressed to msayasone@ucmerced.edu



Set in Dublin after New Year's Eve, James Joyce's 1907 novella, "The Dead," presents Gabriel Conroy's struggle with his personal identity in relation to the people in his life and to the historical context of the novella. The novella was written during Ireland's struggle for independence from England, a time when England divided Ireland into two sections to separate two opposing groups, the British and Irish Protestants in Northern Ireland and the Irish Catholic majority in the rest of Ireland, in an attempt to pacify both groups. "The Dead" was also written during a time "when fiction-making came under special pressure to define its relation to politics" and was published about 56 years after the "Great Irish Famine of 1846-1851" (Levenson 163-64, Roos 100). Since the majority of the Irish people became zealous nationalists when as they defend against English colonialism and the famine, Irish literature created around the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are known to exclude any mentioning of Ireland's "colonial status" and famine (Roos 99). Instead, they were known to celebrate Irish culture and nationalism through the inclusion of Irish mythologies and Catholic values (Roos 99). However, unlike many of his Irish contemporaries, James Joyce makes references to Ireland's colonial resistance against England as well as the Great Irish Famine of 1846-1851 in "The Dead." While Joyce does not explicitly refer to the national struggles, he may allude to them through Gabriel Conroy's nationalistic and personal struggles with his Irish identity in a patriotic Ireland and through the characteristics of the Morkan sisters' dinner party.

Although the Gabriel's struggle with his Irish identity has much to do with the political tensions between Ireland and England, the effects the tensions has on his fellow countrymen prompt them to think in a dichotomy where Irish people who are for Ireland's independence from England are perceived as allies whereas those in favor of English rule in Northern Ireland or are supporting the English in any way are considered, to some degree, traitorous. Because



Gabriel appreciates the culture of other European countries over his own and works as an editor for an English periodical as an Irishman, Gabriel would be considered traitorous by his fellow Irishmen if more of his guests had known about his interests and occupation. In a time and place where Irish pride is significant to combating English colonialism in Ireland, Gabriel feels as if he is forced to prove his Irish heritage by praising Irish culture and by disassociating himself from English culture since it is the English culture and rule being imposed on the Irish. Like James Joyce himself, Gabriel Conroy's Irish identity and his presence in Ireland create social obstacles that prevent him from freely writing and expressing ideas that may not be considered "Irish."

Gabriel Conroy's nationalistic and personal struggles could allude to other Irish writers and their reluctance to include colonial resistance and famine into their literary works because of his reluctance to accept his Irish identity and to relate with his Irish acquaintances. Like the writers who were pressured to represent themselves as Irish nationalists through their work, Gabriel demonstrates his self-consciousness and frustration for how he should present himself and his honesty towards his Irish identity. He became self-conscious towards Lily's "bitter and sudden retort" when he asks about her future plans for instance (Joyce 24). Later in the novella, he became more self-conscious and irritated when Molly Ivors's playful accuses him of being a "West Briton" (Joyce 33). By calling Gabriel a West Briton, Molly jokes that he is a loyalist, a term that refers to "a person from Northern Ireland who believes Northern Ireland should remain part of the United Kingdom" and who is opposed to Ireland's independence from England ("Loyalist" n.p.). Thus, a loyalist is considered by his fellow Irish countrymen to be traitorous towards Ireland.

As a way to allude to the frustration Irish writers endure as they present themselves as nationalists through their work, the novella indicates in many occasions how Gabriel becomes



frustrated with Irish nationalism and culture. The novella, for example, demonstrates Gabriel's annoyance with his Irish guests when it indicates how "[the] indelicate clacking of the men's heels and the shuffling of their soles reminded him that their grade of culture differed from his" (Joyce 24). Gabriel's occupation as a book reviewer for *The Daily Express*, a periodical that opposed Irish independence, hints his distaste for his country. Although he never indicated that he agrees with the periodical's political views, his association with the periodical nonetheless further signifies his emotional and social disconnection from his Irish identity and people. Given that Gabriel is immensely disconnected from Irish subjects, it is ironic that he is given the role of overseeing the dinner party that and giving a speech that both celebrates Irish hospitality.

The dinner party itself symbolizes Ireland's struggle to achieve independence from English colonial influence according to Michael Levenson. In his article, "Living History in 'The Dead,'" Levenson explains how the "Irish hospitality" of the dinner party ironically signifies Ireland's struggle to maintain its autonomy as a country: "...in representing the waving rhythms of an evening party, 'The Dead' is representing the political fragility of Ireland" (Levenson 173). He then explains how Gabriel and the party guests refuse "to acknowledge the political provocations that circulate in their festive midst" by surrounding themselves with art and literature (Levenson 173). In so doing, Gabriel and the party guests become "colonial subjects" that create a "simulacrum of autonomy" (Levenson 173). Levenson argues lastly that the significance of the dinner party is undermined by "its reliance on *English* cultural tradition" (173-174).

While I agree that the dinner party may be an example of the way in which the Irish hosts and guests are desperately affirming their Irish culture as a result of their country's constant struggle to resist England's colonial influence, I would not argue that the dinner party is



undermined because it relies on English cultural tradition. Since Levenson did not provide any examples of how the dinner party rely on English tradition, I would instead indicate that the fact Gabriel Conroy is the one who has been given the role of overseeing the dinner could better explain the reason the dinner party signifies Ireland's struggle to maintain its autonomy against England. As demonstrated in the first half of the novella, Gabriel Conroy is a man who is "sick of [his] own country" and whose behavior and decisions further reflect his desire to disassociate himself from his Irish heritage and nationality (Joyce 32). Therefore, by having Gabriel be the "officialdom" of a dinner party that celebrates Irish hospitality and nationalism, the dinner party becomes an allusion to an Ireland that lacks national unity because Gabriel disassociates himself from his Irish guests not because the dinner relies on English cultural traditions as Levenson claims.

In expanding Levenson's claim, Bonnie Roos argues that the dinner party "economically feeds the English" as well as "the English oppression of their colonies" (Roos 117). In her article, "James Joyce's 'The Dead' and Bret Harte's *Gabriel Conroy*: The Nature of the Feast," Roos lists each item on the table of "Misses Morkans' annual Christmas 'feast'" and describes their national origin as well as where they are placed on the table (117). She explains how there are side dishes that occupy the center of the table that "displace the Irish main dishes at the ends of the table with foods that are less than Irish" including many items that are mainly English dishes, that are likely imported from English colonial territories, and that are products of English invention. Though the inclusion of a greater number English dishes than Irish ones located at the center of the table, Roos claims that the Morkan sisters are ironically providing Irish hospitality with food that were produced by the very English colonial power that oppresses Ireland.



Although I agree with Roos's specific analysis of the numerous items on the dinner table because her analysis further signifies the disunity among some of the dinner guests and hosts, I disagree with Roos's claim that the Morkan sisters contribute to the English through their provision of many non-Irish foods in their dinner party. I would argue, instead, that the sole act of providing food for the dinner party celebrates Irish hospitality. Regardless of where each food originates from, the Morkan sisters provide the food to their Irish guests in Dublin, which later became the capital of Ireland, during a time when the country struggles to maintain its independence from England. Although the Morkan sisters give Gabriel Conroy the honor of leading the dinner and the opportunity to eat the food on the dinner table surrounded by overall friendly acquaintances, the sisters are still providing Irish hospitality to a wide nationalistically Irish audience.

In addition to analyzing the items of the dinner, Bonnie Roos explains that the dinner party can further allude to Irish disunity as well as The Great Famine of 1846-1851 by first presenting parallels Mary T. Reynolds has made between "The Dead" and Dante Alighieri's *The Inferno* (Roos 102). In *The Inferno*, the protagonist travels to the lowest circle of hell, which is "inhabited by traitors against family, guests and nation," and listens to Count Ugolino's story of how he died by starvation and remains frozen in the afterlife with his teeth "embedded in the neck and skull" of Archbishop Ruggieri (Roos 102). In summary, Ugolino reveals how he starved to death in the Tower of Famine with his four children for his crimes against his country. Subsequently, Roos presents Mark Musa's observation of how *The Inferno* hints at Ugolino's cannibalism when he gnaws at the Archbishop's skull and when he "subconsciously chews his own hands" in the Tower of Famine (Roos 104). Roos parallels the cannibalism in *The Inferno* with the cannibalism that occurs in "Famine Ireland," a subject matter that were not be explicitly



spoken in Irish periodicals or literature (Roos 104). Finally, she states that this lack of explicitness about the impact the famine had in Ireland is further evidence of the Irish's "inability to articulate the ugliest realities" (Roos 104).

Analytically, I find Bonnie Roos's provision of the parallels between "The Dead" and *The Inferno* to be effective in explaining how "The Dead" alludes to Irish disunity and The Great Famine of 1846-1851. Within the context of Joyce's novella and Dante's epic, Gabriel and Ugolino are considered treacherous towards their "family, guests and nation" by their fellow countrymen (Roos 102). Furthermore, Gabriel lives in an Ireland that is still negatively impacted by the Great Famine while Ugolino was imprisoned in the Tower of Famine. Most coincidentally, Gabriel's and Ugolino's story simply end in snow, an image often associated with death, decay, and solitude.

Yet, while I agree that Ugolino is "condemned . . . within the frozen, snowy 'inferno,'" I would argue instead that Gabriel actually endured a positive transformation after he realizes how emotionally and socially disconnected he was from his Irish countrymen especially his own wife (Roos 103). When Gretta says she believes that Michael Furey, a lover she had in her past, has died for her, Gabriel was "seized" by a "vague terror" during a moment he anticipated to "triumph" as an intimate partner but instead he "shook himself free of it with an effort of reason and continued to caress her hand" (Joyce 57). It is at this instant, Gabriel recognizes that his resentment towards his national identity and towards his countrymen has led him to think solely about his own well-being and interests. Hearing about Michael's loyalty and self-sacrifice for Gretta's love made Gabriel realize he lacks a compassion for his wife that is as immense as Michael's before he died of starvation. Michael loyalty and self-sacrifice inspires Gabriel to



discard his resentment towards the people and objects associated with Irish heritage and to instead focus on having sympathy and care for others.

After Gretta finishes telling Gabriel about Michael, Gabriel continues to think about the emotional pain Gretta endured as a result of Michael's death. In doing so, he feels as if "a strange friendly pity for her entered his soul" (Joyce 58). He lays under the sheets of the bed besides his wife. When he thinks more about heartache she experienced after Michael Furey's death, the novella presents his greatest demonstration of sympathy and generosity for another individual: "Generous tears filled Gabriel's eyes. He had never felt like that himself towards any woman but he knew that such a feeling must be love" (Joyce 59). Gabriel's decision to "set out on his journey westward" of Ireland where Gretta desired to go and where strong Irish nationalism can be found instead of eastward towards the European continent where he previously wanted to go because of his distaste for his own Irish identity demonstrates Gabriel's transformation into a much more considerate and affectionate person (Joyce 59). Most importantly, the spiritual establishment of his association with the dead through the slow swooning of his soul as her hears the snow fall on both the living and the dead indicates how he is no longer afraid to associate himself with those who are living and dead as his fellow Irish countrymen (Joyce 59).

The Irish participates of the dinner party, according to Scott Brewster, may be reestablishing their connection with the dead especially those whose lives were lost to The Great Famine. In his article, "Death and the Dinner Party: Hospitality and Hungry History in Joyce and Bowen," Brewster writes, "As Freud hypothesizes, and ['The Dead'] appear[s] to confirm, acts of communal eating, devoted directly or indirectly to commemorating absent figures, uncannily 'bring up' history" (Brewster 60). Principally, Brewster claims that by applying Sigmund Freud's primal horde myth, the Morkan sisters host a dinner party to invite ghostly victims of the



Great Famine so they and their guests could acknowledge the historical catastrophe of the famine in Ireland. In summary, the myth involves the cannibalistic consumption of a paternal figure by his children and the hosting of ceremonial feasts that invite ghosts to invade the feasts. Thus, I would agree that the application of the myth on the dinner party demonstrates how “The Dead” alludes to The Great Famine because the myth possesses concepts that revolve around cannibalism, an act common during the famine, and around the reestablishment of the spiritual connection between the living with the dead through hospitality, which is an act used to defend against the famine.

However, I find that Joyce’s a can also allude to the famine without the application of a psychoanalysis concept particularly through Gabriel’s speech. Although none of the characters in “The Dead” make any explicit or implicit references to the famine, Gabriel’s emphasis on Irish hospitality and on remembering the dead can nonetheless show that the novella alludes to the famine. During his speech, Gabriel describes Irish hospitality as a “warm-hearted courteous” tradition handed down by the dinner guests’ forefathers and one that must be handed down to their descendants (Joyce 43). When he recalls how the dinner guests mention in their pre-dinner conversations “great singers of the past,” he hopes that in gatherings like the Morkan sisters’ dinner party, he and the guests would remember and honor those singers as well as the rest of the dead. Gabriel announces, “...we shall still speak of them with pride and affection, still cherish in our hearts the memory of those dead and gone whose fame the world will not willing let die” (Joyce 43). So by having these gatherings, the hosts and guests of the dinner party may be reestablishing their connection with the dead through the constant celebration and generational maintenance of Irish traditions that keep the memory of the dead alive.



Gabriel's speech provides an implication that the majority of the dinner guests if not all have relatives or friends who have deceased. He says to the guests, "Our path through life is strewn with many such sad memories: and were we to brood upon [the dead] always we could not find the heart to go on bravely with our work among the living" (Joyce 44). The implication that so many of the guests have someone whose death will "recur in [his or her] minds" during gatherings like the Morkan sisters' dinner party can be an indication that the death of the guests' relatives or friends is caused by The Great Famine; which as a result, further proves that Joyce's novella alludes to the famine (Joyce 44). When Joyce wrote "The Dead," the famine starved over 700,000 people, which counts for "30% of the population in certain counties" in Ireland (Roos 100). Bonnie Roos discusses more about the famine and its effect on Ireland's colonial resistance: "By the time Joyce was writing "The Dead," the population had dropped to roughly half of its pre-Famine level. These debilitating effects of the Famine on the cohesion of the Irish nation resulted in Ireland's inability to resist the British Empire" (Roos 100). Given the impact the famine made on Ireland's population, the deceased relatives and friends of the guests in the Morkans' dinner party may have been some of the many victims of the famine as well. Since the famine robbed the Irish's ability to resist England's colonial influence, it is easy to see the reasons the Morkans would host a dinner party that celebrates Irish hospitality and the reasons for Gabriel to emphasize the significance of maintaining Irish traditions that honor the memory of the guests' fellow Irishmen.

Evidently, James Joyce alludes to Ireland's historical struggle against England's colonial influence and The Great Irish Famine of 1846-1851 more so than many of his Irish contemporaries through Gabriel Conroy's nationalistic and personal struggles with his Irish identity in a patriotic Ireland and through the descriptions of the dinner party's characteristics



found in "The Dead". Michael Levenson's and Bonnie Roos's analysis of Gabriel and the dinner party as allusions to Ireland's struggle against England's colonial as well as Bonnie Roos's and Scott Brewster's analysis of the dinner party as an allusion to The Great Famine provide perspectives that can help readers view Joyce's novella as a contemporary literary response to Ireland's two national struggles. Unlike the literary works of many of his contemporaries, Joyce not only places Ireland's national struggles in the limelight, but he also emphasizes the importance of responding to those struggles by maintaining Irish nationality and tradition through the provision of Irish hospitality that encourages people to "cherish in [their] hearts the memory of those dead and gone" (Joyce 43).

Work Cited

Brewster, Scott. "Death and the Dinner Party: Hospitality and Hungry History in Joyce and Bowen." *Angelaki* 3.3 (1998): 59-68. *ProQuest*. Web. 12 Apr. 2015.

Joyce, James. "The Dead." *The Dead: Complete, Authoritative Text with Biographical and Historical Contexts, Critical History, and Essays from Five Contemporary Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Daniel R. Schwarz. Boston: Bedford of St. Martin's, 1994. 21-59. Print.

Levenson, Michael. "Living History in 'The Dead.'" *The Dead: Complete, Authoritative Text with Biographical and Historical Contexts, Critical History, and Essays from Five Contemporary Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Daniel R. Schwarz. Boston: Bedford of St. Martin's, 1994. 163-177. Print.



"Loyalist." *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 5 Apr. 2016. Roos, Bonnie.

"James Joyce's "The Dead" and Bret Harte's Gabriel Conroy: The Nature of the Feast."

The Yale Journal of Criticism 15.1 (2002): 99-126.