



Angelica Huston as Gretta, listening to "The Lass of Aughrim" in her father John Huston's 1997 *The Dead*, a movie adaptation of Joyce's tale

Second Set of Lecture/Exam Notes about James Joyce's "The Dead"

Words from the text appear in red.

Critically important terms are highlighted in yellow.

Dating the Action

¶1 • Can we be precise about when the action in "The Dead" occurs? We know that the party celebrates "Christmas-time," so we're within the traditional 12 days of Christmas. We also learn that Freddy Mallins's "mother made his take the pledge on New Year's Eve" — that is, become (in anticipation of the new year) what in Ireland is called a Pioneer, an individual oath-bound to "total abstinence" from alcohol. The Temperance or Total Abstinence movement was advanced both in Ireland and among the Irish in the U.S. by an Irish priest named Father Theobald Mathew (just one "t"): "The Apostle of Temperance." On several occasions on Sunday, January 27th, 1850, that superstar-like figure addressed large crowds in the church (not yet then the cathedral church) of St. John the Baptist in Savannah, Georgia. Here are extracts from a contemporary account: "Congregation chiefly Irish. Some took the pledge"; "[he] administered the pledge to ... some hundreds, including the principal Catholics [of Savannah], and many [other] Americans. The church was not capable of containing a single individual more than were in it. Numbers remained outside"; "1,000 [pledge-takers] for the day." Although Father Mathew died in 1856, his legacy endured. Freddy's being "screwed" (i.e. drunk) indicates that he's already fallen off the temperance wagon, but the detail about "the pledge" situates us after New Year's Eve — that is, between January 1st and the twelfth and last day of Christmas, January 5th.

¶2 • Given the above window of time, by far the most likely candidate-day for the party is the last or twelfth day of Christmas, the evening of which was traditionally celebrated with feasting as Twelfth Night or Epiphany Eve. The next day, January 6th, constitutes the beginning of the ecclesiastical (i.e. Christian church) season of Epiphany, which emphasizes Jesus as the savior of the Gentiles (i.e. non-Jews), such as the so-called three wise men; three kings; or Magi. Among the four canonical gospels, only St. Matthew's Gospel contains the Epiphany story (which doesn't give a number of men but does invoke three gifts): "[T]here came wise men from the east ... | Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews?" (Matthew 2:1-2). In Ireland, Epiphany Day is known as *Nollaig na mBan* ("Women's Christmas") or Little Christmas. By longstanding cultural practice, it was a day off for women from household duties. Some have argued that, in their Gresham Hotel bedroom in the early hours of January 6th, Gretta effectively takes Women's Christmas off from her "conjugal duty" to Gabriel — i.e. her "duty," as his wife, to have sex with him. Remember, this tale was written in 1907, so it's influenced by the mores of its day, although it doesn't always endorse them.

¶3 • During Twelfth Night in medieval Europe, masters and servants — and men and women — often swapped clothing and acted as one another. This social and sexual inversion or "misrule" likely had its origins in the wintertime Saturnalia Festival in ancient Rome, before the Roman Empire became Christian. Joyce probably had in mind Shakespeare's early seventeenth-century play *Twelfth Night*, which includes cross-dressing, a love triangle, a forged love letter, a reconciliation between a twin sister and brother, "cakes and ale," and much music. Its subtitle, *What You Will*, puns on William, Shakespeare's first name. Gabriel's ultimate will or purpose in "The Dead" is to be sexually intimate with his wife; that's why he's hired the hotel room, away from the couple's children. However, what he wills does not transpire.

¶4 • We know that *Twelfth Night* was performed (with an all-male cast) in London on February 2, 1602, although a published version did not appear until 1623. In a way, Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* constitutes a foil for interpreting "The Dead." We call this phenomenon **intertextuality**. A good working definition of intertextuality (a word coined by the French scholar **Julia Kristeva** in the 1960s) is "the shaping of one text's meaning by another text."

¶5 • In the hotel bedroom, Gabriel comes to a realization that Gretta loved another man, the late **Michael Furey**, before she loved him — and that, in the here and now, she continues to love Furey **more than** she loves him. This conclusion is a big deal, so much so that it could be labeled an epiphany. The Magi realize — or have an epiphany — that the baby Jesus is the savior (who will die for humanity's sins). For his part, Gabriel realizes that Michael Furey (who Gretta believes "**died for me**") is his rival for Gretta's heart and, thus, a third party in their marriage. To deploy language from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (see the panel to the right): the music — "The Lass of Aughrim" — that Gretta hears when descending the stairs at Usher's Island after the meal proves to be "**food of love**," and it plays on in her mind once she ascends the stairs at the Gresham. Eventually, she reveals the Michael Furey story to Gabriel, who would be justified in speaking the following lines from (the character **Viola** in) *Twelfth Night*: "She **never told** [about] her love, \ But let **concealment** ... \ Feed on her damask cheek. She pined [away] in thought \ ... \ ... smiling at grief. **Was not this love indeed?**"

"Be not afraid of greatness.
Some are born great,
some achieve greatness,
and others have greatness thrust upon them."

Twelfth Night

"If music be the food of love, play on
Give me excess of it; that surfeiting,
The appetite may sicken, and so die."

"She never told her love, but let concealment,
like a worm [within] th' bud, feed on her damask cheek.
She [pined away] in thought; and,
with a green and yellow melancholy,
she sat like Patience on a monument, smiling at grief.
Was not this love indeed?"

Twelfth Night, Or what you will.

a few extracts of relevance
when interpreting Joyce's "The Dead"

¶6 • The word *epiphany* derives from **Ancient Greek**, and its earliest sense seems to have had to do with perceiving a divine or supernatural "manifestation" or "insight." Such an experience was typically **sudden** and **unexpected**, although a complex mass of circumstances and feelings, some dating deep into the past, might have had to come together to produce it. Given that "The Dead" is a literary work, we should also consider another Ancient Greek term, **anagnorisis**, a reference to the moment in a play or other text when a character makes a **critical discovery**. In his theory of theater, called *Poetics*, the Greek philosopher **Aristotle** defined *anagnorisis* as "a **change from ignorance to knowledge**." Gabriel was ignorant about Michel Furey, but in the hotel bedroom he suddenly and unexpectedly progresses into knowledge of him, perhaps even concluding that Gretta's **furious passion for Furey** may be a core reason why their marriage devolved into "**years of ... dull existence together.**"

¶7 • Note how late the action in "The Dead" occurs. Towards the start of the text, we discover that "**it was long after ten o'clock [at night] and yet there was no sign of Gabriel and his wife**" at the Morkan sisters' party. In other words, most of what happens must occur not on Twelfth Night itself but, instead, after midnight, during the early morning of the next day, the Feast of the Epiphany. As Gabriel and Gretta begin journeying to the hotel, on foot, after the Twelfth Night dance and dinner, the term *morning* features: "**The morning was still dark.**"

¶8 • So much for the day or days, but what about the year? There's a big clue about that, if we revisit the conceit rehearsed in the first set of Lecture/Exam notes. We acknowledged then that interpreting modern tales requires the reader to play private detective, in the mode of Sherlock Holmes. (In his second and most famous novel, **Ulysses**, Joyce makes the name of that famous fictional detective into an action word: "**Sherlockholmesing**.") In a tense moment in "The Dead," Kate Morkan "**fiercely**" rebukes her live-in niece (Gabriel's cousin), Mary Jane Morkan, for defending the decision by **Pope Pius X** to exclude women from church choirs on the basis that music was part of the holy office, which could only be performed by men. (See the comment at the end of ¶2 above!)

¶9 • The decree was made *motu proprio* (that is, without consultation) on November 22, 1903, the feast day of St. Cecilia, the patron saint of music — and both a woman and a martyr! Here is the text (in English translation) of Section V.13 of the document:

[S]ingers in church have a real liturgical office, and that therefore women, being incapable of exercising such office, cannot be admitted to form part of the choir. Whenever, then, it is desired to employ the acute voices of sopranos and contraltos, these parts must be taken by boys, according to the most ancient usage of the Church.

Kate's sister, Julia, has relied for financial security on her job in a church choir: specifically, the position of "leading soprano in Adam and Eve's," the popular name for the Church of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which is a Roman Catholic church operated by the Franciscan order of friars on Merchants' Quay (pronounced *key*; means *wharf*), very near Usher's Island. The pope's November 1903 determination is a "passion"-inducing development and a "sore subject" for Kate, and her outburst about it allows us figuratively to wear our Sherlock Holmes hat and date "The Dead" to after 10:00 pm on January 5th and into the "still dark" morning hours of January 6th, 1904.

Land-and-House Nationalism

¶10 • As we've learned, "The Dead" never comments on the Royal Barracks, a huge military base, despite that complex's sitting on a hill just across the River *Life* or Liffey from Usher's Island. In a similar fashion, the text completely omits mention of a profoundly significant, quite recent development in Irish history. More than Pope Leo X's pronouncement about women's participation in church choirs, it would have been a hot media topic in November 1903 — hot enough to be still resonating in early January 1904, not least in newspapers, such as those on which Mary Jane remarks: "I read this morning in the newspapers [note the plural form] that the snow is general all over Ireland." The Irish press devoted much of 1903 to what's generally called the Wyndham Land Act, which was passed by the United Kingdom parliament ("Westminster") in London on August 14th, 1903, and put into effect on November 1st, 1903. For Ireland,

An Act to amend the Law relating to the occupation and ownership of land in Ireland and for other purposes relating thereto, and to amend the Labourers (Ireland) Acts.
[14th August, 1903.]

BE it enacted by the King's most Excellent Majesty, by and with the advice and consent of the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, and Commons, in this present Parliament assembled, and by the authority of the same, as follows:—

PART I.

LAND PURCHASE.

the Wyndham Land Act was a big, headline-grabbing news item in August and, again in November of 1903. It inaugurated a new system or paradigm, and its effects were (like the snow in "The Dead") general all over the land of Ireland.

¶11 • The incipit of the Wyndham Land Act is reproduced on the left of this page. A senior government administrator named Wyndham was intimately involved in the politics that precipitated it; however, a more formal title for it is the Irish Land Purchase Act of 1903. It was by far the most comprehensive and impactful

in a series of Irish land acts passed by the UK parliament in the post-Great Hunger period in an attempt to placate Irish land campaigners. As in most nations under colonization, land nationalism featured in Ireland as a central socio-economic and political concern. Typically, the colonist appropriates (or robs, by force of arms) indigenous lands, constraining the original, native owners to subsist as renting tenants on property they formerly owned. Land nationalism seeks to replace the colonial landlords by restoring the natives (or, at least, their descendants) to ownership, also called proprietorship.

¶12 • As Irish agriculture shifted after the Great Hunger of the 1840s, becoming more cattle-based than crop-based — and becoming increasingly efficient, export-oriented, and profitable — the native tenants wanted, more than ever, to keep their profits rather than continue (sometimes under duress) to submit them to the (often absentee) colonial landlords, who'd been top dog for centuries. Most tenants concluded that owning their own land was the solution; and spurring them forward even more was anxiety about their lack of security of tenure, should another large-scale famine occur.

¶13 • The Great Hunger saw much **eviction** or **ejection** of tenants from their rented farms; however, if you owned the farm (i.e. had absolute security of tenure), you couldn't be evicted. Especially after 1879, a year in which a new famine seemed possible, the Irish scene became dominated by land politics, known at the time as the **Land Campaign** or the **Land War** (really, a war of words or rhetoric, of mass demonstrations, and of parliamentary strategy). The **Land League** (later renamed the **National League**) and the **Ladies' Land League** were formed to advance and fund these politics, and the organizations established branches not just in Ireland but also in Irish communities abroad, including in Savannah and other Georgia cities. Passage of the Wyndham Land Act in 1903 marked a signal victory for the Land Campaign.

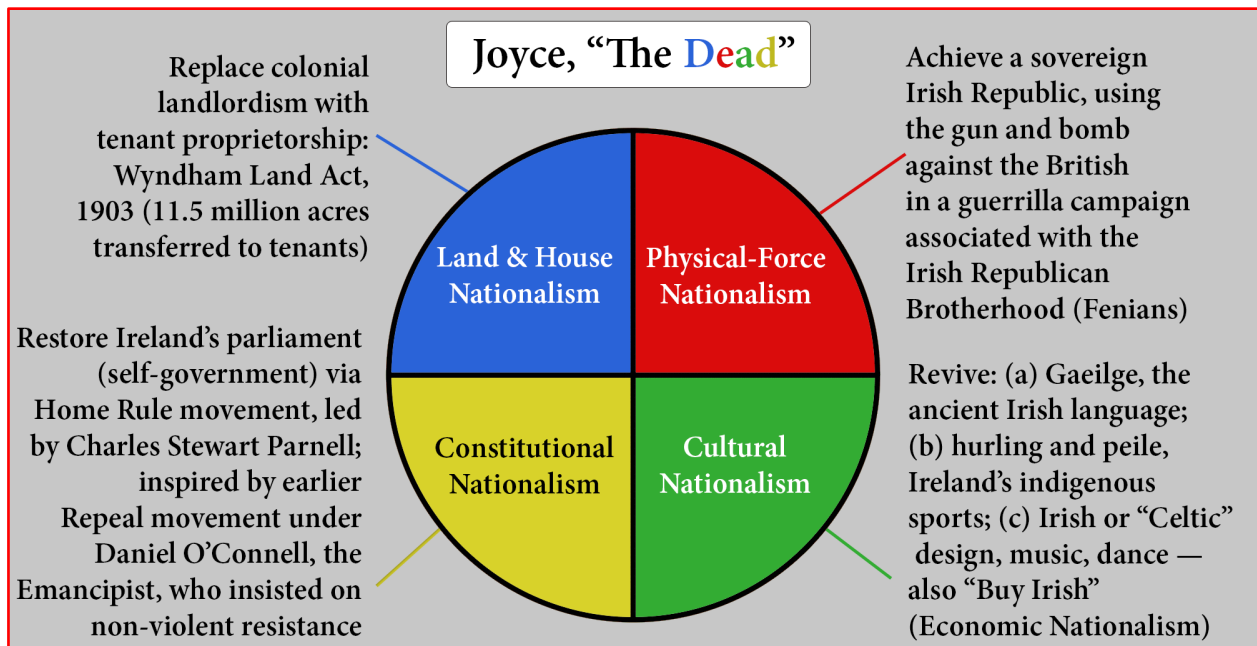


¶14 • According to the scholar **Fergus Campbell**, the Wyndham Land Act constitutes "**revolutionary legislation**" because it "**fundamentally transformed** the nature of land holding in Ireland." The outcome of the Wyndham Land Act of 1903 and the follow-up **Birrell Land Act of 1909** was that 316,000 Irish tenants purchased farms totaling **11.5 million** of Ireland's 20 million acres. Few nations on earth have experienced so large a transfer of land from colonial landlords to native tenants, and even though "The Dead" is an urban text, rural Ireland and its agricultural land and economy permeate it. The Morkan sisters "[rent]" their dwelling from a businessman dependent on Irish farmers, "**Mr. Fulham, the corn factor [wholesaler]**." Furthermore, due to their almost certainly having lived through the famine, they make high-quality food, such as "**diamond-bone sirloins**," a priority, despite their "**modest**" financial means.

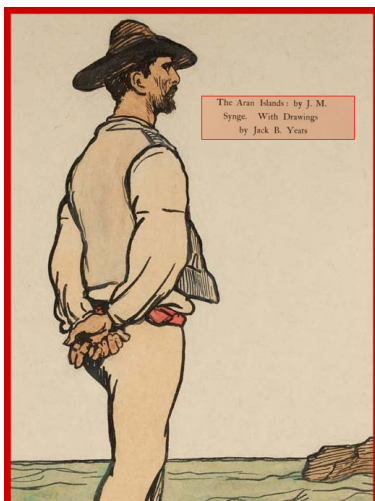
¶15 • But why do the characters not directly address the Wyndham Land Act? In particular, Gretta would seem an appropriate spokesperson, for she all but embodies the rural Irish populace, whose victory the Act primarily was. Arguably, Gretta deserves a social victory. Having dated Michael Furey in "**the way they do in the country**," she lost him. What is more, in her own suburban (or half-urban, half-rural) home in **Monkstown**, just south of Dublin city, she "**long**" endured her mother-in-law, who once disparaged her for being "**country-cute**." In a way, Gretta does assert some rural will by not making her body sexually available in the rented space of the hotel bedroom, a reaction to "The Lass of Aughrim," a ballad whose villain, **Lord Gregory**, is an Irish landlord. However, perhaps the most cogent reason why the Wyndham Land Act does not dominate the dinner-table conversation at 15 Usher's Island on Twelfth Night 1904 is **antipathy towards land nationalism on the part of physical-force nationalists**, of whom, our last lecture suggested, Gretta's husband, Gabriel, is one. Many physical-force or **unreconstructed** nationalists feared that settlement of the land question would radically blunt the average Irish person's desire to overthrow the British colonial regime. This worry proved well-founded, for as their **material circumstances** improved due to proprietorship, Ireland's Catholic farmers — by far the largest coterie in overall population — became less committed to physical-force activism, at least until the late nineteen-teens.

¶16 • A couple of notes. In Ireland, the tenant typically had to construct his own home on the rented land; however, that building or "**improvement**" immediately became the colonial landlord's property. Thus, the Land League's rhetoric frequently used such exhortations as: "[K]eep a **firm grip** on your **homesteads and lands**." Given the role of the house as a figure, we should identify **house-and-land nationalism** (not just land nationalism) in the Irish case. One resistance practice used in the land struggle was the boycott, named after a landlord's agent or representative, **Captain Charles Boycott**, who was deliberately ignored (or boycotted) by the tenants from whom he attempted to collect farm-rents.

While just a summary, the following diagram is useful when contemplating Joyce's critique of nationalism in "The Dead." After Daniel O'Connell's death in 1847, the inevitable leadership vacuum combined with the Great Hunger (1845-1849) to threaten his form of constitutional nationalism, known as Repeal: a large-scale effort to repeal or void the Act of Union (which had created the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland) and, thus, restore self-government to Ireland via an independent Irish parliament in Dublin. After the Great Hunger, a new, charismatic leader emerged to advance constitutional nationalism: Charles Stewart Parnell. His campaign to restore the Irish parliament was labeled Home Rule (as opposed to Repeal). The grandson of an American admiral, Parnell, like O'Connell before him, became known as "the uncrowned king of Ireland." Joyce and his family were enthusiastic supporters of Parnell, who, by contrast with the Catholic O'Connell, was a member of the Church of Ireland. Parnell led not just the Home Rule movement; he was also one of the founders of the Land League. Furthermore, he was prepared to strategize with the Irish Republican Brotherhood (or Fenians) via an arrangement called the New Departure.



Gaeilge: Blessing & Curse



Jack Butler Yeats's "The Islandman" exemplifies the fetishization during Ireland's Cultural Revival of the Aran Islands as the "real Ireland"

¶17 • Molly Ivors, as we've discovered, represents the cultural-nationalist movement called the Gaelic League, which was founded in 1893 and still exists. Its mission was to de-Anglicize Ireland by reviving the country's indigenous tongue: the ancient language of Gaeilge. Popular among members (especially not-yet-married members) were Gaelic League summer schools — adult and coed — in remote, Gaeilge-speaking zones, such as the "Aran Isles," a three-island archipelago technically part of Greta Conroy and Michael Furey's native county of Galway, but located "out in the Atlantic." One notes that "The Dead" almost invariably uses the verb *come* with a double entendre that includes the sense of sexual orgasm. Thus, we get a sense of the erotic opportunities presented by Gaelic League summer schools in Molly's entreaty to Gabriel (which also deploys "splendid," an adjective perhaps associated with "taking posh" in England/English): "We're going to stay there [the Aran islands] a whole month. It will be splendid out in the Atlantic. You ought to come. ...[Y]ou will come, won't you?" said Miss Ivors, laying her arm hand eagerly on his arm."

¶18 • Apparently, Gabriel — a physically and intellectually accomplished man — causes the dancing Molly to become “eagerly” tactile. She thinks he’s hot. Thus, one can legitimately wonder why she refuses to stay for the Morkan Sisters’ Twelfth Night meal. Presumably, that would afford her additional chances to interact with Gabriel, albeit none as intimate or regulated as the dance called Lancers. During that formulaic dance, Molly can control the conversation, knowing that she and Gabriel will partner for a fixed length of time and then separate before rejoining. Consider, for example, one of their time-limited encounters during Lancers; “[W]hen they met in the long chain [a formation within the dance] he was surprised to feel his hand firmly pressed [by Molly].” By contrast with the dance, the meal might oblige her to sit, for an extended period, beside an undesirable instance of Irish manhood, such as the drunk Freddy Mallins or the “dirty old man” Mr. Browne, self-described as “the man for the ladies.” But a more likely anxiety for Molly is the challenge of competing at the table with her clear rival for Gabriel’s affections: his wife, Gretta. Molly has elected to predicate her identity on Gaeilge; however, as Gretta is a native of Co. [county] Galway it’s likely that she’s not a learner of Gaeilge but a native speaker. During Lancers, Molly can control the topic of Gaeilge, but should that element of cultural nationalism surface during the relative free-for-all of dinner conversation, Molly might be exposed as inadequate vis-à-vis Gretta. Arguably, she determines an early exit to be the best way to maintain the upper hand, an action she literally accomplished during the dance, as quoted earlier: She “[lay] her arm hand ... on his arm.”

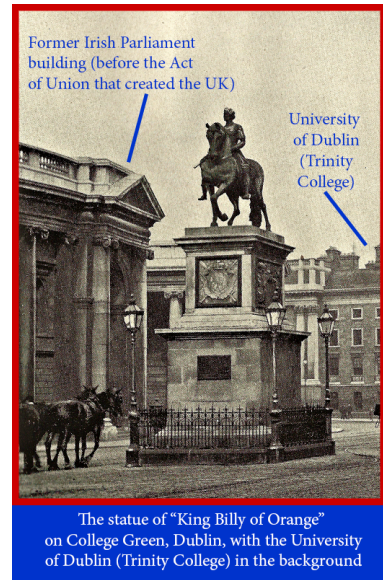


¶19 • To refuse hospitality, as Molly does in declining to “stay for supper,” constitutes a serious breach of social etiquette in Ireland, primarily due to the country’s traumatic memory of the Great Hunger and other, earlier famines, such as the Year of the Slaughter (1740-1741), the cause of a proportionately (but not numerically) greater loss of population than the Great Hunger. As survivors of the Great Hunger — an event whose final year (1849) was just 55 years earlier — the “[o]ld ... aunts,” Julia and Kate Morkan, display a kind of sacramental reverence for the potato. The devastation of that dietary staple (specifically, a variety called the lumper potato) by consecutive years of blight was the nutritional, although not

the political, reason for the Great Hunger. (A blighted potato is pictured on the left. The cause is attack by an oomycete or fungus-like microorganism called *phytophthora infestans*.) During the meal, Lily serves “hot floury potatoes” in a way that resembles the distribution of the host during a Roman Catholic mass (i.e. eucharist), namely, from “a dish ... wrapped in a white napkin.” Already peeved at Molly due to her denigrating him, when dancing, as a “West Briton,” Gabriel by inference highlights her insult towards his aunts and their food — that is, her act of “go[ing] away discourteously” — when, in his speech, he slams Ireland’s “new generation” as a “hypereducated” coterie that “lack[s] those qualities of humanity, of hospitality, of kindly humor which belonged to an older day.”

¶20 • One remarks on the precipitous nature of Molly’s “go[ing] away”: her “abrupt departure.” She “[runs] down the staircase,” upon which, later, Gretta will linger, arrested by hearing “The Lass of Aughrim.” Immediately prior to Molly’s engaging with the stairs, Gretta addresses her “frankly,” characterizing her as “the comical girl,” a phrase that may resonate anon when the reader comes to understand Gretta as a tragic woman. While on the stairs, Molly articulates the only two explicit words of Gaeilge in “The Dead”: “Beannacht libh cried Miss Ivors.” Obviously, the reader must interrogate this phrase. Molly could have said something simpler: slán, which means “bye.” Although still an entry-level phrase, beannacht libh is a bit more show-offy. The noun or substantive beannacht translates as “blessing”; and the prepositional pronoun libh translates as “with y’all.” So, in effect, Molly cries, “May a blessing be with y’all.”

¶21 • Despite his job of “teaching in the college” (i.e. a high school), Gabriel is uncomfortable with public speaking. Before delivering it, he frets that “[h]is whole speech was a mistake from first to last, an utter failure.” As his anxiety increases, he recalls a source of criticism from his past, which may account for his lack of self-confidence, namely, his judgmental mother: a deployer of “slighting phrases” and a source of “sullen opposition”; in fine, “[a] shadow” over his life. In the event, the speech proves successful, so much so that, in the street-level hallway at 15 Usher’s Island, as the party is breaking up, Gabriel, the reluctant speech-giver, declaims another, impromptu speech, with the topic being his maternal grandfather’s horse, Johnny — specifically, its continually “walk[ing] round the statue,” in central Dublin, of King William III (“King Billy of Orange”), a symbol of the political ascendancy of Protestantism in England and its possessions, including Ireland. If Gabriel injected verve into his dinner-table speech due to his anger against Molly Ivors, then she perhaps was the cause of a blessing (*beannacht*). The reception to both the dinner-table speech and the unexpected, follow-up “Johnny” speech stimulates Gabriel so much that he progresses from fretfulness not merely to self-assurance but also to sexual arousal. In a manner of speaking, Gabriel becomes “the man.” Walking after Gretta on the snowy sidewalk, in search of a horse-cab, he experiences “blood ... bounding along his veins” and determines that he needs “to be alone with her.”



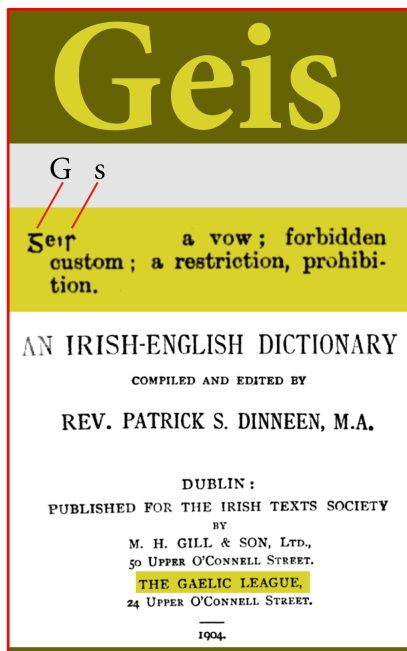
¶22 • If the strong city man Gabriel Conroy feels blessed upon attaining the hotel bedroom, the circumstance shifts therein. He becomes cursed, in so far as Gretta reveals the presence in their marriage of a dead lover: the weak country “boy” Michael Furey. Gabriel had to deliver a speech, a holiday message, to his aged aunts and their guests, but now he’s the recipient of a message. On the original Epiphany, wise men came from the East to a rented stable in Bethlehem. Early on Epiphany of 1904, a dead man may be said to come from the West of Ireland to a rented hotel room in Dublin. Michael Furey’s sudden, unexpected presence in the hotel room as a kind of ghost or haunting prevents Gabriel from achieving an affirmative answer to the question posed as the last concern in the tale’s incipit paragraph: “who had come.” Due to Gretta’s memory of Michael Furey, Gabriel will not enjoy sexual congress with her; he will not come. Gabriel’s name, chosen by his domineering and scoffing mother, rings true, for in the three major Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) Gabriel is the messenger archangel, while Michael is the warrior archangel, the conquering hero, leader of God’s army.

¶23 • Initially in the hotel room (as we’ve already acknowledged), Gabriel becomes so sexually frustrated that he seriously contemplates raping Gretta: “He longed ... to crush her body against his, to overmaster her.” He rehearses in his mind the fact that he could “take her as she was” — that is, force her have sex with him despite her not being in the mood. The reader must countenance the possibility that mate rape has been a feature of the Conroys’ marriage. Perhaps the hiring of the hotel room this year was envisioned as a means to begin afresh, to leave behind a history of spousal brutality. In the end, Gabriel successfully resists his sexually violent impulses, his “fever of rage and desire,” and that act of suppression in favor of engaging in conversation with Gretta causes her to compliment her tall husband with both a kiss (which she delivers by “raising herself on tiptoe” to his face-level) and the spoken observation, “You are a very generous person.”

¶24 • When close-reading a literary work, one must pay attention to repeated terms, and in “The Dead” *gas* is one such term, used invariably in an erotic or sexual context. Consider the following instances of *gas*.

- In the pantry, Gabriel acknowledges Lily as a “growing girl” — that is, a young woman early in her sexual maturity (perhaps even a pregnant woman) — when he observes her in “gas” light.
- To criticize Mr. Browne’s regular Christmas-season visits to their home in sexual pursuit of Mary Jane, her unmarried niece, Aunt Kate “archly” states, “[H]e is very attentive. . . . He has been laid on here like the gas.”
- After his two successful speeches, when growing with lust, Gabriel observes Gretta in his aunts’ hallway; specifically, he remarks to himself how “the flame of the gas [light]” illuminates the “rich bronze of her hair.”

¶25 • Things are going well for Gabriel until Gretta presents Michael Furey, the name of whose home village — Oughterard, in Co. Galway — means “upper height.” Gretta may have to stand on tiptoe because Gabriel is tall or high, but Michael commands the upper height. As part of the series of questions that the university-educated school teacher Gabriel asks Gretta about Michael, her first and truest love, he inquires, “What was he?” — in other words, “What profession did he follow?” Given the text’s associating gas with sexuality, even lust, the reader shouldn’t be surprised by her response: “He was in the gasworks.” Molly Ivors may be learning Gaelige and, thus, know a few standard conversational phrases (such as *Beannacht libh*), but in delivering the word *gas* to her husband in the context of *gasworks* Gretta — very likely a native speaker of Gaelige — definitively emplaces into the reader’s consciousness a critical instance of a Gaelige word, namely: *geis*.



¶26 • In Gaelige, the feminine noun *geis* is pronounced like the English word *gas*. While it’s often tough to translate accurately from one language to another, a reasonable definition of *geis* is “curse” — the opposite of Molly’s *beannacht* or “blessing.” See how Joyce did that? Let’s take a look at how *geis* appears in a Gaelige-to-English dictionary published in 1904 by (among other entities) the Gaelic League. An edited version of the entry appears on the left. At that time, Gaelige was written and printed in Ireland’s indigenous version of the Roman alphabet. You’ll see that “curse” isn’t given as a definition; however, other dictionaries do include precisely that word under *geis*. That said, words that could approximate to “curse” do appear in the Gaelic League dictionary: “forbidden custom”; “restriction”; “prohibition.” In ancient Irish legends, a hero who had to achieve a task (e.g., rescue a bunch of captives) was tested not just by the task itself but also by having to endure some kind of restriction or prohibition or curse that made accomplishing the task all the harder. *Geis* refers to that handicapping restriction, prohibition, or curse.

¶27 • Say I’m a hero and want to assume a false name and wear a disguise in order to accomplish a task in a foreign kingdom. The *geis* (restriction; prohibition; curse) put upon me might be my having to reveal my true identity if asked my name by a stranger in the kingdom. In the hotel bedroom, Gabriel discovers that he can’t be (or, at least, can’t easily be) a hero in his marriage because a restriction or curse has been put upon him — because a *geis* is being worked upon him. In the immediate term, Michael Furey constitutes a restriction or curse, for (although just a memory) he effectively prohibits Gabriel from enjoying intimacy with Greta. We could argue that Michael Furey, late of the gasworks, works a *geis* (pronounced “gas”) on Gabriel Conroy. As part of Ireland’s ongoing Cultural Revival, ancient legends were being reprinted and recirculated in a variety of forms, not least short story collections, stage plays, and children’s books. Thus, the ancient idea of the hero’s *geis* was becoming mainstream.

¶28 • But there's more. What, by the end of his questioning, Gabriel may (unintentionally) extract from Gretta is the essence of an admission that, before their marriage, she became pregnant by Michael Furey. In this case, the critical word is "convent." Until the 1990s in Ireland, convents popularly known as **Magdalen Asylums** would absorb pregnant but unmarried young women, at least until they had birthed and weaned their infants. In a country that until the late twentieth century permitted **almost no birth-control resources (even condoms)** and **scant sex education**, unwed pregnancy was common, but considered a social disgrace. Gretta may have *regretted* the pregnancy for social reasons.

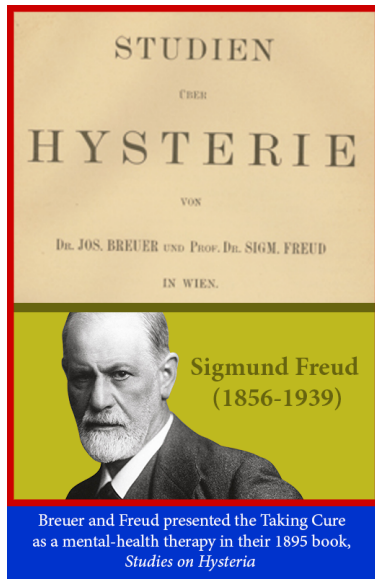


Nuns and the children of unmarried mothers in the orphanage of an Irish Magdalen Asylum or convent

¶29 Psycho-emotionally, Gretta may have **repressed** much of the trauma of an early, so-called **illegitimate** pregnancy, simply in order to push forward in life and attain the status of a middle-class suburban wife and mother. However, the tune and lyrics of "The Lass of Aughrim," heard on the stairs, trigger recurrence of her trauma, which was compounded by the death of the young father, Michael Furey. A likely scenario is that once she started to become visibly pregnant **"about the beginning of the winter,"** Gretta's family or **"people"** obliged her to leave Galway for **"the convent"** in Dublin, staging that move out of her **"grandmother's house in Nun's Island,"** a district in Galway city, the capital of Co. Galway. (Nun's Island is named for a community of **Poor Clare** nuns, historically housed in a residence called **Bethlehem**.) Although Gretta desired to communicate with Michael, he was ill (possibly with influenza) and **"[she] wouldn't be let [i.e. allowed to] see him."** A letter from her to him **"saying ... [she] would be back [in Galway, from Dublin] in the summer"** precipitated a surreptitious, **Romeo-and-Juliet**-like encounter between them in cold rain in her grandmother's **"garden,"** an incident that accelerated his death. It could be that, in the old woman's garden, Michael entreated Gretta to emigrate with him, perhaps to America, imagined as a New World Garden of Eden. (Recall the **"American apples"** on the dinner table.) Pressed by Gabriel to admit that she **"was in love with him [Michael],"** Gretta responds, **"I was great with him at that time."** While that expression is a **Hiberno-English idiom** for dating, it echoes the phrase in the King James Bible about the Virgin Mary's pregnancy: **"being great with child"** (Luke: chapter 2, verse 5).

¶30 • The text of "The Dead" provides only a snippet of "The Lass of Aughrim," which Gretta hears while wearing a **"skirt"** distinguished by **"salmonpink panels."** In the collection or "cycle" of Irish mythology known as the **Fenian Cycle** — from which the nineteenth- and twentieth-century physical-force-nationalist Fenian movement took its name — the leading hero, **Fionn ("fair-haired"),** gains profound knowledge while still a child by tasting the **Salmon of Knowledge**. Gretta's being exposed to the line, **"The babe lies cold ...,"** from "The Lass of Aughrim" may, for her, constitute a harrowing moment of revisiting the tragic knowledge that the first child she conceived, Michael's child, died — or, at least, died to her due to its being adopted or else raised by nuns in a convent orphanage.

¶31 • It could be that Gabriel inadvertently foreshadows the knowledge that, during **"her first girlish beauty,"** Gretta became pregnant due to **"romance in her life"** with Michael. At supper, referring to the availability of dressing for the goose, Gabriel announces: **"[I]f anyone wants a little more of what vulgar people call stuffing let him or her speak."** The concluding "let ..." clause resembles a portion of the **marriage ceremony** in the Church of England's 1559 **Book of Common Prayer**: **"[I]f any man can show any just cause why they [the couple] may not lawfully be joined together [in marriage], let him now speak, or else hereafter forever hold his peace."** As to the preceding "vulgar ... stuffing" clause: it evokes the vulgar or slang use of "stuffed" for sexual intercourse, especially the woman's becoming pregnant. Gabriel may have committed sexual violence in the marital bed, but when confronted, in the Gresham, with knowledge that his wife was an unmarried mother, he ultimately determines to hold his peace.



¶32 • In conclusion, one might wonder why Gabriel does not act to satisfy his “keen pang of lust” towards his wife but instead opts to ask highly personal questions that provide her with an opportunity to share her past trauma, encapsulated in the word “convent.” As with most everything in this deeply accomplished short story, the reason is hidden in plain sight. When Gabriel adds Germany to the countries he identifies as bicycle-tour destinations, one must contemplate what in the German language an educated individual living in 1904 would want “to keep in touch with.” Well, the simple answer is Sigmund Freud, the Austrian-born, German-speaking psychoanalyst. While several of Freud’s breakthrough works were available in his native German in 1904, no English translations had yet appeared. We must assume that Gabriel has exposed himself to some Freud, particularly *Studien über Hysterie* (“Studies on Hysteria”), co-written with Josef Breuer and first published in 1895. That work presents the narrative-based therapeutic method known as the Talking Cure. In essence, Gabriel converts the hotel bedroom into a Freudian clinic, where, in semi-darkness, he administers the Taking Cure to Greta,

permitting her to re-live enough of her trauma verbally, in a safe space, so as to transcend it. Gabriel might also know other works solely by Freud, such as *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, whose original, German-language edition appeared in 1901. In that text, Freud asserts that because “[t]he unconscious ... knows no time limit” it is possible to restore “every former state of the memory content.” We know that smells and sounds (such as loud bangs or pieces of music) can trigger traumatic memory, and Freud’s claim is that the psychotherapist can use a question-and-answer technique to guide the distressed individual so that, in effect, she or he becomes a story-teller who narrates the events, long repressed in memory, that caused the original trauma.

¶33 • Clearly, many humanities or humanistic concerns receive deep and nuanced attention in “The Dead.” Other, different interpretations of this short story exist, and we could have explored additional matters rehearsed and critiqued within it. For example: the religious subtexts include the motif of the rented upper room or *cenacle*. The food-centered party occurs upstairs, suggesting the *cenacle* in which Jesus conducted the Last Supper before his crucifixion. Scholars hold that, after Jesus’s final ascension into heaven, the Holy Spirit visited his disciples in that same *cenacle*, bestowing upon them the Gift of Tongues (i.e. the ability to speak multiple languages) in the event celebrated as Pentecost or Whit. In the upper room in the Gresham, Gabriel, who is fluent in several tongues, finds himself visited by a spirit, too: that of Michael Furey, who works a *geis* — a word in Gaelic, the tongue that Gabriel claims “is not my language.” Earlier, we acknowledged the notion of intertextuality, and we can exit this discussion by sharing Joyce’s source for the name Gabriel Conroy and for the conceit of snow: an American novel entitled *Gabriel Conroy* about the California Gold Rush of 1848-1855, written by Bret Harte and first published in 1876.

GABRIEL CONROY

BOOK I
ON THE THRESHOLD
CHAPTER I
WITHOUT

Snow. Everywhere. As far as the eye could reach — fifty miles, looking southward from the highest white peak, — filling ravines and gulches, and dropping from the walls of cañons in white shroud-like drifts; fashioning the dividing ridge into the likeness of a monstrous grave, hiding the bases of giant pines, and completely covering young trees and larches; rimming with porcelain the bowl-like edges of still, cold lakes, and undulating in motionless white billows to the edge of the distant horizon. **Snow lying everywhere over the California Sierras** on the 15th day of March, 1848, and still falling.

It had been snowing for ten days: snowing in finely granulated powder, in damp, spongy flakes, in thin, feathery plumes; snowing from a leaden sky steadily; **snowing fiercely**, shaken out of purple-black clouds in white flocculent masses, or dropping in long level lines, like white lances from the tumbled and broken heavens. **But always silently!** The woods were so choked with it, — the

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