

“Becoming Shades”: Paralysis and the Body in James Joyce’s “The Dead”

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Abstract

Writing this paper amidst an economic crisis triggered by a political stalemate by global capitalist forces has enabled me to deepen my understanding of the depiction of social malaise embedded within Joyce’s oeuvre. This paper examines through close reading the interplay between paralysis and embodiment in James Joyce’s short story “The Dead”, arguing that the text reconfigures paralysis as an infectious social condition that is reflective of a spiritual and physical degradation within the characters. The body becomes the primary site through which such illness is articulated. The characters alternate between hesitation and absolute fixity, and this disconnection removes them from the vitality of society towards a liminal position between life and death. In my reading, Joyce utilises this state to understand how political agency is eroded away by turning citizens into ghostly un-‘dead’ beings, a condition which continues to recur in the modern world.

Keywords: Modernism, death, James Joyce, paralysis, Dubliners

Introduction

Florence Walzl asserts that the “central pattern underlying all others” in James Joyce’s *Dubliners* is a “creeping paralysis in a progressive diminution of life” (222). Walzl’s thesis draws on Joyce’s letters to his publisher, where he informed his publisher that he would call the series “Dubliners”, “to betray the soul of that hemiplegia or paralysis which many consider a city” (qtd. in Anderson 73). His depiction of this progressive deterioration of Irish society reaches its culmination in “The Dead”—the final story in the collection.

The Joycean theme of paralysis has received considerable critical attention, but a sustained emphasis on the bodily nature of its depiction has been lacking (see Ji Zhinan et al. 2024, El Hajj 2026). Critics like Walzl have largely preferred to mention Joyce’s interest in medical records and physical illness in passing (Walzl 230), instead of considering its wider implications on his portrayal of modern Irish society’s dismal condition. This paper focuses primarily on “The Dead” as a case study to investigate the way in which Joyce’s development of this theme as a reflection of decay and disenfranchisement in *Dubliners* occurs through his clever crafting and manipulation of the bodily senses of the characters. Additionally, two other short stories from *Dubliners* – “The Sisters” and “Eveline” – are examined to establish how throughout the collection, the recurring patterns of delay, decay and death are intensified into a sensory and existential tableau of the tension between paralysis and life. By focusing on the way in which

the characters' sense of reality is forged through an amalgamation of their sense of sight, hearing and on the interaction of their physical body with the material world, the paper argues that any discussion of Joyce's depiction of societal malaise necessarily entails a thorough analysis of its embodiment in the corporeal body of individual characters. This serves to render it more visceral and perfectly complements the "Modernist" views of life's base and vulgar nature that preoccupied many of Joyce's contemporaries (Childs 18).

It is important to clarify what "paralysis" entails in the context of the present argument. For Walzl, "paralysis" in Joyce's text is a representation of the inherent and deep-seated stasis at the centre of Irish society that its inhabitants refuse to acknowledge (Walzl 223). Walzl sees this as a primarily "spiritual stasis" (Walzl 223). In *Dubliners*, society is presented as a "sterile" and "stagnant" space whose occupants appear to be caught in the perpetual mire of fragmentary, incomplete, and unsatisfactory existence (Walzl 223). The malady pervades every aspect of the social sphere and transfigures it into an "inescapable cage" where nothing finds fulfillment (Walzl 223). The paper draws from Walzl's understanding of paralysis and situates it corporeally to explore the decay that pervades Ireland in Joyce's imagination. Here the contention lies not in denying the essential metaphorical nature of Dublin's paralysis that critics like Walzl have established but in formulating an alternative understanding of the way this is reflected on the palpable bodies of its inhabitants. Using the already forged critical connections and ideas, the paper attempts to develop them further.

The Motif of Eyes: Paralysis of Sight and Bodily Entanglement

James Fairhall comments on the "motif of eyes" that Joyce establishes in *Dubliners*. For him, Joyce's repeated references to eyes are on the one hand, an acknowledgment of the classical trope of "eyes as portals to the soul" where they serve as a reflection of the true essence of the characters (Fairhall 34). On the other hand, it betrays humanity's "faulty and paralyzed perceptions", where they are unable to perceive the truth and are fixated on what is superficial (Fairhall 34). Although Fairhall does not include "The Dead" in his theorizations, it is useful to consider the text's numerous references to seeing and the limitations of sight in the light of his statements. The word "eyes" appears thirty-three times in the text as a testament to the thwarted attempts made by the characters to understand each other through the act of looking. The pathway from mere sensorial perception to understanding is thwarted by a paralytic incapability which leads to the characters being distanced from one another and sometimes even from oneself. Gabriel's "restless eyes" are manifestations of his search for a concrete sense of self that drives the narrative ("The Dead" 144), which had been obscured by the "green shades" that he chose to wear. Just as he chose to limit his physical sight by wearing those shades, he practices a similar willful blindness to the harsh realities of his life for a considerable portion of the narrative. Most of the guests at the party have vacant "mirthless eyes" ("The Dead" 146) which hints at the perpetual monotony of their ignorant existence even though they are socialising. While Aunt Julia's lost "slow eyes" are symptomatic of the "living dead" existence that she drags on ("The Dead" 145). Her directionless vacant gaze is emblematic of a similar apathy towards life that Joyce found to be the cause of Dublin's paralysis. In contrast to the "living dead" who populates the rooms, Miss Ivors's "prominent brown" ("The Dead" 152) "rabbit's eyes" are full of warmth and shine with joy ("The Dead" 155) since she is one of the very few individuals in the text who is shown to not bother about censoring her personal

opinions just to gain others' approval. This may also be why she finds herself at odds with Gabriel's hypocritical intellectualism, which seeks to deny his own roots and instead engages in blindly mimicking the "continent" ("The Dead" 147). Curiously, it is also her presence that discomfits Gabriel and almost stupefies him. He is able to deliver his speech once he sees Miss Ivors depart early.

It can be argued that the only character in the story whose "big dark eyes" mirror their true essence is that of the dead Michael Furey ("The Dead" 178) whose striking eyes remain in Greta's memory long after he passed into the world of the dead. Joyce's powerful irony manifests itself in the fact that the one blessed with true vision has no use of it anymore. Even so, Gabriel later concedes, it was far preferable to "pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dismally with age" ("The Dead" 182). Gabriel's reaction of discomfort and envy towards Miss Ivors and Michael signals to his fading sense of self. Gabriel's epiphany is his encounter with his own image; his realization that he is a man who has lived life without having felt any strong emotions that would provide momentum to free his soul from the sclerotic grip of paralysis.

Joyce's critique of stasis may be understood as an attempt to help Dublin's populace to resist this slow decay into oblivion. His critique of Irish society was informed by this redemptive vision and not a hopeless resignation as critics like Fairhall have often considered it to be. This becomes apparent when the motif is traced across the stories in *Dubliners*. In "The Sisters", the first story of the collection, hopelessness is tied to paralysis as the story begins with the claim, "there was no hope for him this time" ("The Sisters" 3) while referring to the illness plaguing Father Flynn. The illness and the subsequent paralysis invokes pity and repulsion in the young narrator who is transfixed by the enormity of the transition that the priest is making, a journey into death. The narrator spends repeated nights trying to peek through the window to confirm if the local priest and his spiritual mentor Father Flynn had passed away but as he later admits, he lacked the courage to knock and enter the house ("The Sisters" 6). The long drawn out lines seem to extend this moment of unknowing as the dark both pulls him towards the dismal scene of suffering and death as well as repels him ("The Sisters" 3). The story plunges the reader into a spiritual and physical darkness, a failure of vision as we share the same confusion with the narrator as to the way forward. It is only in his dreams that the shade of Father Flynn visits him as if to confess something. The narrator however resists even this encounter as he shuts his eyes and hides underneath the pullover as if to banish the vision of his dead mentor ("The Sisters" 5). Like Gabriel in "The Dead" the eyes of the narrator in "The Sisters" lack the prophetic insight to understand the suffering of people around them. Avoidance and denial becomes the way these characters cope. Gabriel spends a significant portion of the narrative without acknowledging his own shortcomings while the narrator in "The Sisters" avoids the "beady little eyes" of his uncle and the subsequent questions his family raises about Father Flynn so that he does not have to confront the way in which he too may have failed the man ("The Sisters" 4). The news of Father Flynn's death gives the narrator a temporary sense of freedom but it quickly dissipates as the figure of the dead father haunts him in his sleep and their shared history is a spectre alongside him everywhere he goes ("The Sisters" 6). To numb the discomfort the narrator either drinks or refuses to look at the questioning glances of the people around him ("The Sisters" 4). This atrophied vision where one alternatively sees, refuses to see is remedied only in the last story collection "The Dead" where Gabriel finally understands that

the wreckage that is his life. The ending is euphoric for this healing moment where he both *witnesses* (evident in his visual descriptions of the snow enveloping the world outside) and *experiences* his own “swooning” soul being united with the collective souls of both the dead and living (“The Dead” 182). In “The Dead”, the fading sight that has been developed from the beginning of the collection, is fleetingly restored, as Gabriel is, for a moment, able to both see and understand.

Stagnant Bodies, Stagnant Spaces: Immobility and Necrospatial Politics

Degradation affects both vision and spatial existence of the characters in *Dubliners*. As characters struggle to understand the truth of their reality, their subjective liminality is embodied by spaces such as staircases, banisters, windows which act as pivotal sites in the plot’s development. These spaces emblemise the “death worlds” that Achille Mbembe had theorised in his essay *Necropolitics*. For Mbembe “death worlds” are new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the living dead (Mbembe 37). Mbembe’s theorisation was focused on the colonial machinery; however, this paper draws from it and finds it a useful lens to understand the degradation within Dublin which is represented in Joyce’s short stories since the state of exception and violence that characterises necropolitical spaces in Mbembe is also present in the slow degradation of the Irish national identity in *Dubliners*. The methodological framework of necropolitics as tied to the death of subjectivity appears particularly useful since *Dubliners* interrogates the slow violence of living in a nation which seems unable to move beyond the shadow of colonialism. In the context of this paper, Mbembe’s “death worlds” are used to understand the way in which certain spaces saturate the characters’ failures and moral degradation to symbolise a larger societal failing and death.

In “The Dead”, the narrative is set off by Gabriel’s aunts leaning against the banisters to enquire about his arrival. Edward A. Kopper Jr. posits that these “threshold sites” function to heighten the “emotional distance” between the characters by ‘separating what lies below from above’ (Kopper 81). Thus, fulfillment is denied amidst this ever-widening chasm between the self and the other. In spite of eagerly waiting for him, Aunt Kate and Julia were initially unable to register his presence (“The Dead” 143). Similarly, Gabriel fails to discern his wife’s identity when she stands on the staircase listening to ‘The Lass of Aughrim’ (“The Dead” 173). To him she appears as a distant figure and failing to reach her he thinks of preserving the moment on a canvas naming it “Distant Music” (“The Dead” 171). Gabriel’s choice to capture this vibrant and delicate moment onto a sterile unmoving canvas instead of experiencing it might be baffling but it reflects the reality of a city that had gotten so entrapped within past’s quagmire that the very existence of the present had been negated. Gabriel’s awkward confrontation with Lily similarly takes place in the threshold of the staircase where he is unable to connect to the girl and instead tries to gloss over his fumbling attempt by offering her money (“The Dead” 145). These spaces thus become “death worlds” for the characters where they are forcibly faced by the issues that they have tried to avoid. In Gabriel’s case it is the impending death of his aunts, his crumbling relationship with his wife, and the class differences he avoids acknowledging under the garb of good-natured modernity that controls and keeps him tied to the spot. They are “death worlds” since the momentary illumination or confrontation does not create any pervasive changes within the characters but instead work to highlight the vertical disparity between them and the Others. It is only when his aunts call for him once more that Gabriel is

able to move into the house. Thereon the whole party becomes a bland paean to what the city dwellers considered to be their glorious past.

Characters in *Dubliners* appear frozen in pivotal moments that go on to define their lives. In “The Dead” Gabriel remains frozen and separated from his family and his wife. “Eveline”, another story of the collection, enters on the story of a woman paralysed in a manner almost reminiscent of Shakespeare’s Hamlet by the enormity of the choice she has to make. Eveline can either stay in a familiar setting with her violent father or move to Buenos Aires with her lover Frank who she describes as “manly and kind” (“Eveline” 27). It is not love or change that Eveline expects from her father, an idea that would make the ending seem redemptive in some capacity. As she sits near the window and imagines it to be a portal connecting her bleak present to a bucolic childhood, she acknowledges that her father’s momentary acts of kindness are always followed up by a drunken relapse into threats of physical violence (“Eveline” 23). She even recollects that her idealisation of her childhood which helps her retain sympathy for her father is marred by occasional encroachment of memories of him being cruel to her mother. Present circumstances however do not push Eveline into action. She remains hostage to the past and the terrible uncertainty of following her heart leads her to stagnation. She remains frozen at the threshold of the gate as Frank beckons her to come towards him, “passive, like a helpless animal. Her eyes gave him no sign of love or farewell or recognition” (“Eveline” 43). The painful nature of the paralysis is evident in the helplessness and the animal-like desperation that characterizes Eveline’s inability to choose a new path. This emerges as a metaphor for Ireland where the birth of a new nation is halted in a “death world” defined by an identical resignation to the memories of the past.

In one instance, the guests who were absent for most of Mary Jane’s obscure performance and did not get to hear her, come back to applaud louder than any of the others who were actually present to uphold a certain idea of high society prestige (“The Dead” 157). This mindless glorification of the past ideals and standards interferes with future progression since people cling on to their idealized visions of the past. Gabriel, Eveline, and the narrator in the “The Sisters” are all hostages to a vision of a life that has never existed. The narrator in “The Sisters” remembers the acceptable version of Father Flynn while ignoring his failings while in “Eveline” the titular character constantly polices her own memory to convince herself that her father is tolerable. Nothing is gained from this attachment. Rather, as Gabriel in “The Dead” realizes, it is imperative to learn from the past and let the “shades” of it mingle with the future (“The Dead” 182).

Some critics instead consider the staircases to be redemptive sites. Virginia Moseley finds in these tightly structured spaces allusion to Dantean imageries of descent and resurrection. She sees them as crucial tools to rouse the characters out of their normalized apathy by exposing the fissures within the seemingly perfect social world that they create for themselves (Moseley 78). Moseley’s analysis brings up valid points and anticipates the “epiphany” at the narrative’s end that would hopefully trigger constructive changes in Gabriel’s persona. However, one cannot miss the circularity inscribed within these spaces—Gabriel and the guests use the same staircases to enter the party and then to return home. The opening and closing scenes of the party are strangely repetitive. The confusion and nervous energy prior to Gabriel’s entrance is transfigured at the end into endless reiteration of goodbyes (“The Dead” 173)

--Good night, Gabriel. Good night, Gretta!

--Good night, Aunt Kate, and thanks ever so much. Good night, Aunt Julia.

(“The Dead” 173)

This curious litany of good nights sheds light on society’s façade that seeks to preserve some semblance of normality within chaos and looks for reassurance in repetition. Even though the text in many instances stresses the distinct lives and experiences of the guests for the moment all their differences are forgotten (ignored rather) and they unite under a shared sentiment of good wishes. ‘The again’ here, highlights the banality and repetitive nature of their existence caught in the loop of time and made to go on perpetually. Such cyclicity is a characteristic feature of Modernist texts (Childs 13).

While most of the characters remain lost in reminiscing about people from the past, in these memories too they are on the threshold, a site removed from proximity to the subjects of their recollection. Greta remembers Michael Furey, a man she passionately loved, standing at a distance underneath a window and calling her. At the same moment Gabriel thinks about the past “moments of ecstasy” (“The Dead” 175) in their relationship. The minor characters in turn ponder over dead musicians and artists who have been long gone (“The Dead” 172) and about whom they have heard from the others. Seldom can a moment of true human connection be found. Even in memories the characters are separated by time and space. These memories keep them separate in spite of their current physical proximity. Memory plays an important role since reminiscing boundaries of time and space are collapsed. Greta says that she can clearly remember the “expression” in Michael’s eyes (“The Dead” 178), for her as for Gabriel, memory is a visceral experience. It is not a recollection for her but it is a reliving of the past yet the very nature of remembrance fades the intensity so that the shades can approach the window outside but cannot enter into the temporal and spatial moment that the characters occupy. The problem arises that they refuse to consider that their past consists of nothing but “shades” of themselves. Due to this wilful ignorance they are caught in the gyre of time and are incapable of appreciating their present fortunes. Ireland in Joyce’s imagination was a victim of this same sentimental penchant of uncritically reliving the past glories.

‘Spectres of the Past’: Memory and Auditory Paralysis in ‘The Dead’

Music and aural perception also play a vital role in “The Dead”. The text is littered with unnamed voices that whisper, and songs that celebrate past lives. Faced by the weakening of their collective vision these characters are often left with their voices to assert their presence. Curiously, Gabriel never gets to listen to a song in its entirety even though he considers himself to be an educated and cultured man whose references are seldom understood by random guests that populate his aunts’ parties (“The Dead” 145). In most cases, he is unable to hear it though he tries (“The Dead” 171) hard to strain his ears. A staccato rhythm is created in the text by conversations that are halted midway and are frequently hampered by miscommunication, almost as if the characters are paralysed mid-thought.

Jeremy Lane comments on Joyce’s conscious implementation of aural elements in his texts. Joyce, asserts Lane, was extremely attuned to the “limitations of language” and hence tried to “reweave the fabric” by accentuating the gap between experience and description (Lane 21). Gabriel’s attempt to commune with his society is always thwarted leaving him feeling like a “failure”. Words, as Lane has argued, are incapable of transmitting the speakers’ intentions in its pristine form. A lot gets lost and is reinterpreted while understanding what the other has to say. It is for this reason that Gabriel feels snubbed by all three women with whom he attempts to communicate, while at the same time he acknowledges the limitations and gaps in his own

understanding of them ("The Dead" 145, 153, 176). When he speaks to his wife, they are unable to listen to each other; they often talk at each other rather than actively listening to what is being said. This is evident in Gabriel's thoughtless questions about the nature of Greta's love for Michael. "You were in love with him?", he goes on asking without stopping to register the tired and 'devastated' look on Greta's face ("The Dead" 178). Gabriel's insecurity and enormous sense of hurt at the distance between him and Greta appears tactless when expressed through the use of language. His attempts at comforting the house-help Lily too had been similarly degraded when his concern was worded in a patronizing manner that led to Lily's retort. Language thus no longer functions as a means of communication; rather it impedes understanding and paralyzes connections.

Each of his encounters with his female acquaintances severed a particular fantasy that he had created to make himself comfortable. Lily's dismissal destroyed his presumptions of being a benevolent peer ("The Dead" 145); Miss Ivor's ridicule exposed his hypocrisy of worshipping foreign culture without knowing his own ("The Dead" 152). These two then precipitate the disastrous encounter with Greta where his fantasies of a happy passionate marriage completely disintegrated ("The Dead" 172). It is at the end of this that he experiences the epiphany. Crucial to this entire development is the felt absence of words. Each of Gabriel's attempts to explain himself using a fallible limited language overburdened by memories of the past leads to failure. It is only when he surrenders to the experience of despair that he is able to momentarily rise beyond it in the form of the epiphany, an experience that had eluded the characters in the earlier stories of the collection.

Conclusion

The ending passages of "The Dead" need to be considered in detail as they bring together disparate fragments of both this particular narrative as well as the collection. A significant episode in this section is Gabriel's reflection in the swinging mirror ("The Dead" 176). He catches a glimpse of himself and for the first time is able to acknowledge, "himself as a ludicrous figure, acting as a penny-boy for his aunts, a nervous, well-meaning sentimentalist" ("The Dead" 179). While in earlier instances both Greta and Gabriel were trying to hide themselves from sight by being confined to dark spaces ("The Dead" 179), here he finally faces himself and realises the futility of the "veil" that he presented before society. It is this insight that restores his vision and ultimately triggers the epiphany bringing the narrative to an end.

Similar to Luke Thurston, the paper also regards Miss Ivors, Michael, and Greta to all be reflections of the fractured portions of Gabriel's own self (Thurston 26). Gabriel defines himself against what he can never be. He is incapable of being a devoted nationalist like Ivors, as well as utterly incapable of feeling intense emotions of love which Greta and Michael have felt (Thurston 398). It is here that Gabriel consolidates and repairs his fractured identity which is evident in the intensely sensorial descriptions of the ending passages. "The light taps" on the window and the spectral presence of the dead Michael Fury help him to discard his artificial, constructed self to harmoniously mingle with the "shades of the dead" in an experience that lulls his soul to sleep ("The Dead" 182). The figures of Patrick's Morkan's dead horse who symbolised Dublin's entrapped population that went "round and round and round" and Aunt Julia who epitomized the "paralysed intellect" are amalgamated with their antithesis—the fierce shade of Michael Fury who had willingly given his life for proclaiming his love ("The Dead" 182). As Gabriel's "flickering identity" dissolves, the "solid world" left behind by the dead also

dwindles (“The Dead” 182). At this moment of utter ecstasy Gabriel is able to comprehend the universal eternal unity amongst the dead and the living. This is crystallised in the image of the snow which is the text’s central symbol that “falls silently” over the living and the dead (“The Dead” 182). The joy however is fleeting since Gabriel has to return to his daily life.

As the restrictive binaries between the self and the others, the dead and the living, are removed, death no longer seems like a threatening prospect. In the “soul’s swooning” spirituality is regained momentarily beyond the paralysis of will and intellect while the “thorns” and “crooked crosses” (“The Dead” 182) hint at the possibility of mankind’s redemption even in the face of disruptive forces. The paralytic forces however are too pervasive to be fought against for long. By abandoning the confines of his corporeal body Gabriel is able to confront his reality and thus it is he who brings the narrative to an end. What is certain is that the limitations of the human senses are surmounted momentarily in a euphoric surrender to mortality the trajectory of which the paper has elucidated.

Throughout the course of the paper, using “The Dead” as a case study, it has been argued that Joyce depicts society’s paralysis through the bodily senses of his protagonists. Dublin’s inhabitants are so ensnared by their past that the present loses all significance for them. Their senses are limited—they refuse to see each other, are hardly able to listen to each other and are most certainly incapable of understanding each other. Ultimately, in the last story, Gabriel Conroy, the chief narrative persona transcends the confines of his material body, sheds his artificial disposition and manages to glimpse into the redemptive reality of life. This breaks the vicious cycle of paralysis and provides a redemptive end to the collection that had begun by stating “there is no hope for him this time” (“The Sisters” 3).

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