Pre-Rebellion Anxiety and Acceptance in James Joyce's "The Dead"

Scholars and fans alike have studied James Joyce's writing looking for answers to the ever-evasive author's intentions. Joyce once said of his literary work, "I've put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant" (Hitt). This paper will be yet another take on a perhaps unanswerable, but nonetheless valuable question of what Joyce intended to portray through the famous story "The Dead." This paper will argue that the character of Gabriel is meant to represent an overarching Irish cultural consciousness in late 1800s/early 1900s Dublin that was grappling with the impending violence of the Easter Rebellion of 1916. Many critical texts examine post-war anxiety, however, this essay will look at the possibility of pre-rebellion anxiety, specifically through the characterization of Gabriel Conroy.

One facet of what I will define as pre-rebellion anxiety is the presence of domestic conflict regarding national identity. The issue of the potential for a free Ireland and emerging Irish nationalism was a dividing force during the time period of "The Dead." Joyce explicitly addresses this through the character of Miss Ivors. At the dinner party, when Gabriel is paired with Miss Ivors to dance the quadrille, she accuses him of having English sympathies. She presses him to visit Western Ireland, presumably because the West is seen as having a more traditionally Irish culture. This can be read as her pressing him coyly to reveal where his true sympathies were in terms of a free Ireland. Once Gabriel makes clear that he wants to tour the rest of Europe rather than go to the Aran Isles, Miss Ivors ridicules him further for aligning himself with the rest of Europe rather than his homeland. Gabriel's reaction is the beginning of the first facet of pre-war anxiety, which I will call awareness. This refers to an awareness of the seriousness of the national conflict at hand. Gabriel reacts with confusion to the accusations,

thinking to himself, “He did not know how to meet her charge” (Gutenberg). However, soon after, the confusion turns into subtle inklings of awareness towards the impending rebellion. This is shown through a continuation of Gabriel’s thoughts immediately after– Joyce writes “He wanted to say that literature was above politics. But they were friends of many years’ standing and their careers had been parallel, first at the University and then as teachers…” Note Gabriel’s hesitation to refute her claims as well as his confusion about these accusations coming from not only a friend but an intellectual and class equal, someone he can’t write off as inferior in thought. This exchange illustrates Gabriel beginning to recognize how deeply divisive this issue was becoming, to the point where it pervades even the most intimate, domestic gatherings as well as the workplace and the academy. Through Gabriel’s inner dialogue and the characterization of Miss Ivors, Joyce’s clever craftsmanship of this scene allows for all of these issues to be present all in one dancing scene, introducing us to a hidden theme of an arising cultural consciousness regarding pre-rebellion anxiety.

Arising consciousness regarding potential for violence to achieve Irish independence is also shown through Gabriel’s word choice, specifically in his speech at dinner. He uses words like “honor”, “guard” and “tradition” when talking about Irish hospitality. These words conjure images of national conflict and war in a speech that is in reality simply devoted to thanking his aunts for hosting a party. Again, Joyce is subtly creating consciousness of conflict pervading domestic spaces through the figure of Gabriel– not to mention the name Gabriel itself conjures images of a righteously violent archangel in a spiritual war. Even more conspicuously, Gabriel speaks of the “tradition of genuine warm-hearted courteous Irish hospitality, which our forefathers have handed down to us and which we must hand down to our descendants, [which] is still alive among us.” This idea of generational lessons and a national culture itself being “still

alive" suggests erasure by an outside force, of course in this case being England. It illustrates a process occuring mentally all in one night of Gabriel's realization and acceptance of the violence to come.

The end of the story marks Gabriel's acceptance of the necessity for violence in maintaining an Irish identity and affirms the presence of anxiety in terms of an impending rebellion. The closing lines: "The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland… His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead." Many scholars have examined these final lines and the symbolism of the West, and there is great argument about its meaning. Famous Celtic scholar John V. Kelleher argues for a more symbolic analysis of the journey westward in his classic paper "Irish History and Mythology in James Joyce's 'The Dead.'" Kelleher writes "I hold that the famous sentence in the last paragraph of the story, 'The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward,' is not to be interpreted literally. I cannot agree with Ellmann that the "context and phrasing of the sentence suggest that Gabriel is on the edge of sleep, and half-consciously accepts what he has hitherto scorned, the possibility of an actual trip to Connaught" (418). This idea of a symbolic trip westward supports the idea of pre-rebellion anxiety if we follow the aforementioned line of reasoning that the West represents the traditional, ancient culture of Ireland that the British have oppressed. It marks Gabriel's acceptance of the need for violence to preserve this Irish culture, and going westward symbolically means restoring Ireland to one nation, from west to east.

Works Cited

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