James Joyce’s “The Dead” (from *Dubliners*, 1914) is a short story with a title that seems to encourage readers to speculate—who are the dead, and what did they die of? Though readers might expect to find the narration of a tragic physical death, the title seems to point more strongly to a theme of spiritual and emotional death. “The Dead” depicts the desolation of the living and the triumph of the dead, portraying the monotonous lives of men and women who try to fill the vacuum of their souls with the luxuries of this world. As critic Silvana Carporaletti states, the story’s characters “are not distinguished as good or bad according to their behavior, but as “living” or “dead in life” - as those who live in duration and remain spiritually alive, capable, in spite of the passing of time, of intense and genuine emotions, or those who are shriveled inside by a repetitive and materialistic existence, spent in the isolation of their own selfishness” (408).

Although Gabriel Conroy, the protagonist of “The Dead,” is a man with a body and a soul who is alive, he has symbolically ceased to live because he appreciates neither his nor others’ inner richness. He measures a person’s worth according to his/her social standing and cultural abundance. At his aunts’ Christmas party, where he will deliver a speech, Gabriel feels flustered
because he cannot bear to hear “the indelicate clacking of the men’s heels and the shuffling of
their soles,” as this “reminded him that their grade of culture differed from his” (2174). Gabriel
is so concerned with his material success that he loses track of that which actually gives him life,
his soul. Because man is a composite of body and soul, the absence of one of these components
results in death; the body, man’s material part, cannot subsist without the presence of a spiritual
soul that stirs emotions, which are then transmitted to and felt by the body. As a result, Gabriel
wanders blinded by an ornamented veil behind which he can only see reflections of life that he
ignorantly accepts as true renderings of reality. He does not exhaust his life’s possibilities
because he alienates his soul from others in such a way that people can only know him from the
surface. Gabriel’s soul finds joy in a materialism that socially sets him apart from others; his
snobby, self-centered attitude moves him to look down on people, who consequently repel his
odious company so that in the end all emotional communication is cut short. Because he is dead
to feelings, his life is void of substance; emotions to him are no more than words and outward
demonstrations without any major significance.

I believe that “The Dead” is divided in two parts. The first part of the story, which
comprises the Christmas party and Gabriel’s speech, concentrates on showing the superficial
pleasures that people strive for and cherish. The second part, in turn, contains both his wife
Gretta’s confession and Gabriel’s awakening and epiphany. In the first part, which is
considerably longer than the second, Joyce depicts an atmosphere in which superficiality reigns;
the description of the celebration does, in fact, revolve around “the skirts that swept against it
[the drawing-room door]” and “the shuffling of feet.” In contrast, the second and final part of
the story, though short, is more mystic and intimate because it reveals humans’ ability to regain
sensibility even when they have been numb for a long time. Joyce sets Gabriel’s epiphany
around the day of Epiphany, as if to show that the spiritual and the secular spheres are interconnected because Gabriel experiences a spiritual revival while spending his night at a party; by bringing the spiritual and the secular together, Joyce might be suggesting that it is possible for anyone, whether religious or not, to experience a twist of fate. By breaking it thus, Joyce shows that both parts serve to emphasize that people can live their entire lives in ignorance only to arrive at the realization that they have wasted precious moments of existence. This division does not in any way contradict Maggie Doyle’s vision of the story as separated into three sections: “(1) Gabriel is rebuffed (repeatedly), (2) The dinner scene and speech, (3) The hotel ruminations” (54).

As the story progresses, Gabriel becomes aware of the imperfection of his whole person and so embarks on a search for new meaning that is so characteristic of Modernist writings. After leaving the Misses Morkan’s dinner party, Gabriel is suddenly seized by a desire to recover long-forgotten thoughts and feelings in order to give meaning to the desolate wasteland of his life: “A wave of yet more tender joy escaped from his heart and went coursing in warm flood along his arteries. Like the tender fire of stars moments of their life together, that no one knew of or would ever know of, broke upon and illumined his memory. He longed to recall to her those moments, to make her forget the years of their dull existence together and remember only their moments of ecstasy. For the years, he felt, had not quenched his soul or hers” (2194).

However, he fails to accomplish his goal because as he strives to win back his wife’s attention, Gabriel discovers that Gretta’s heart lies with the dead man that she once loved. Unable to possess all he desires, he experiences a poignant figurative death, a heartbreak, because his efforts to obtain redemption through love are maimed: “Gabriel does not escape, and from the flatness of what has in fact been ‘the years of their dull existence together’ (p. 214), he can elicit
only the kiss of generosity, not that of passion (p. 217),” for “with the crucial entry of the ‘dead,’ he has lost once more” (Lucente 284).

Though shattered by his unfulfilled expectations, Gabriel gains much from his suffering because he learns that true love transcends the limits of time and space. Bartell D’Arcy’s performance of “The Lass of Aughrim” triggers a chain of emotions in Gretta’s whole being because the song reminds her of a buried, yet ever-present dead man that changed her understanding of love. “The Lass of Aughrim” moves Gretta because it is a song that tells the story of a girl who, like Michael Furey, wants to reunite with her loved one, Lord Gregory. Although she calls to Lord Gregory from outside his window with her dead baby on her arms, he ignores her beseeching call and leaves her to her fate under the rain. Michael Furey, the one man in the story that is literally dead, taught Gretta that in order for life to be fulfilled, one must know and experience some kind of love. Although he passed away at a young age, Michael lived to the utmost because he extended his interests beyond himself to such an extent that he “died for her [Gretta’s] sake”; Michael and Gretta “never lived together as man and wife,” (2198) but his sensibility enabled him to imprint Gretta’s heart with a mark of everlasting love that her physical contact with her husband Gabriel could never match or obliterate. As Elizabeth Mack tells her students, it is important not to “overlook Michael Furey” because “although he is dead, many consider him a major character. Michael Furey was once emotionally alive, but now physically dead. Gabriel, although physically alive, is emotionally dead” (120).

Capable of deep emotions, Gretta has had to conform to living with a mere shade of the love she could have possessed. Although Gretta has not been unhappy with Gabriel, she has never been able to fill him with as much love as she would have liked because he has isolated his inner feelings; since he can only feel superficially, “the first touch of her body, musical and
strange and perfumed, sent through him a keen pang of lust” (2195) that reveals Gabriel as an animal incapable of translating corporeal sensations into spiritual perceptions. Besides Michael Furey, Gretta is the only profound character in the story because she has lost herself in the alleys of true emotion; Gabriel, on the other hand, lacks stable identity because he performs different roles according to the different circumstances: “It hardly pained him now to think how poor a part he, her husband, had played in her life” (2198).

Up to this point, the story conveys a sense of hopelessness and devastation inasmuch as it dwells on the lost times and opportunities of Gabriel’s flat existence. The story veers from this mood as it introduces Gabriel’s epiphany because it lets shine a ray of hope. Gretta’s abstraction and ensuing confession move Gabriel to meditate on the stupor and stupidity that have for so long made him act as a mere shade; Gretta’s “betrayal” shows him the meaning of true existence and encourages him to act: “Better pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dismally with age” (2199). Gabriel understands that “one by one, they were all becoming shades” (2199) due to the passage of time, but he decides to make up for the fleeting nature of life by changing his ways and learning to live fully for as long as he has; in one day he gains maturity, as shown by his “generous tears,” (2199) which do not diminish but rather strengthen his manhood. Gabriel admires “the dead” because Michael Furey is still able to captivate and enchant the living, thus affirming that love and the search for true love are both unceasing and everlasting.

Though “The Dead” is set in twentieth-century Dublin, it can be translated to any place and time because the issues that the characters in the story had to face are very much similar to those that the people of today have to go through. Although technological prosperity is not in dissonance with spiritual growth, it is more challenging to look out for our spiritual needs when
we have to tend to the reproduction of manufacture and work in general. We are so worried about technological advances that, like Gabriel, we lose track of that which gives us life; because we take our relationships for granted, we take little care to nourish them. We have so many means at our disposition, but what is their use when we can no longer value people for what they are but for what they make? Involuntarily, we become victims to the machines that we ourselves create, thus falling into the group of the living dead or dead in life. I second Carporaletti’s belief that Joyce’s goal in writing “The Dead” is “to denounce the dangerous emotional bluntness that the continuous flowing of time inevitably induces in people, and to shake them out of their spiritual numbness” (409).

“The Dead” exhorts readers to shake themselves out of their deadened state because there is much more to life than the passing of time; since we are all doomed to fade out “into a grey impalpable world,” we should exert ourselves to make the most out of our existence before we approach “that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead” (2199). This story teaches that exterior ostentation does not fulfill interior expectations because there is more to a person than just a body. Although the story might seem somber and nihilistic, it actually shows that no matter how dead we are in life, we can all undergo an epiphany that will hone our integrity as humans. This epiphany will help us avoid leading a “wayward and flickering existence” (2199) because it will test our worth as a crucible does gold under fire.
Works Cited


