

Death in James Joyce's "The Dead"

"*O, the rain falls on my heavy locks*

And the dew wets my skin

My babe lies cold..."

(Joyce, 228) lulls the voice of a certain Bartell D'Arcy from James Joyce's "The Dead." Now, you ask, what does this mean? Why are you quoting a song that's describing a picture of a dead person in the rain? Well, other than the very fact that this story is called "The Dead," this quote also marks the point that turns the entire story upside down—metaphorically. In this not-so-short story, the scene in which these lines are sung, the scene in which Gretta Conroy—wife of Gabriel Conroy—stands at the top of the staircase, "leaning on the banisters, listening to something," (Joyce, 227,) marking the point that foretells an event that will create the sensation of feeling cold—the death of the heart.

Hearts can't die though, right? Certainly they can! However, it usually becomes a rather permanent thing, but one must recall that the word *heart* can be used to define different things. It can be the actual physical heart that pumps blood through one's body or used to describe one's emotions or the lack thereof. It is in the latter definition that I'm using the word *heart*. Both of these can *die*, but in more popular terminology, the heart is capable of *breaking*.

In this scene, you have Gabriel Conroy—the main character (or *is* he?!...He probably is. After all, *he*'s the one who gets screwed over at the end of the story). Gabriel is helping to see the guests off who were leaving after the Misses Morkan's annual dance and he later moves "[to] the dark part of the hall gazing up the staircase," where "A

woman was standing near the top of the first flight, in the shadow also," (Joyce 227.) I will admit it; the first time I read this passage I had the chills running up my arms. The term of darkness—actual dark and then shadow—is referred to in these passages and you get the picture of your modern horror film right here. Albeit, the rest of the story does not have the same tone that I claim to have felt in this passage, but it painted a memorable scene in my head—because it stood out to me.

The woman is later revealed to be Gabriel's wife, Gretta, who is standing at the staircase, listening to D'Arcy's music as he plays the song, *The Lass of Aughrim*. This is the song that was quoted earlier, and I do not know the rest of the lyrics. However, reading into the words, it quite states that the "babe" is dead, since coldness is an attribute to death—now remember this, I'll talk about it again in a bit. Later in the story after a little Gabriel-is-aroused-let-us-make-love scene, we find out that this song reminded Gretta of the one person whom she had loved dearly and who loved her in return.

His name was Michael Furey and he was a sickly man. He used to live back in Galway, and despite being frail, he was full of furious love—much like his last name suggests. He apparently sung the same song, *The Lass of Aughrim*, which was why it reminded Gretta of him, but the circumstances in which she last saw him alive also relates very well to the song. When the younger Gretta was going to move to Dublin, he—in a very sick state—went to her house in the freezing rain to see her one last time, and consequently see himself off, since he died soon after. "My babe lies cold..." (Joyce 228) the song says.

This does not go very well with Gabriel, who out of *Furey* he is left to ignore his arousal and realize that he can never love his wife the same way that Michael had. He is a

man of intellect and façades, and there is no way he can live up to what Michael did, who went so far as to stand in the cold, get soaked to the bone, and die a week later. Mr. Conroy has to come face to face with this realization, no matter how hard it is. Without a doubt, Gabriel loves his wife, as was clearly seen in that scene, but what he knows is that he cannot express it in the same way. Thus, just as the snow fell outside of the hotel he and Gretta were staying in, his heart fell, also. It was a cold sensation, a realization—and thus a *death*.

None of this could have happened as well as it did if it wasn't for the scene with the staircase and D'Arcy's song-playing. The scene set up the passion within Gabriel but also the longing within Gretta. It set up a tone and caused the reader to sense that something was amiss. Gretta was either enjoying the music because of the beauty of it—which was never described as such—or because of some far-off memory that she was recalling. In the very paragraph the word “gloom” is used, and Gretta is described as “grace[ful] and myster[ious],” (Joyce, 227.) That scene sets up for the gradual fall of our dear protagonist. It set up his eventual *death*.

Bibliography:

Joyce, James, ed. Barry Levin. 1976. *The Portable James Joyce*. Harmondsworth [etc.]: Penguin Books. 190-242.