Feasting to Death: Life as Dream and Desire in James Joyce's *The Dead*

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Closing the *Dubliners* and the representation of the Irish capital and community setting at the turn of the century, *The Dead* is the longest piece, concluding the set of stories with a distinct message about life and intellectual fulfilment. From manuscript to print, the collection went through a seven-year saga of trial and error with various publishers, being finally published in 1914, after the entire first print-run was burned before it could reach the public, on 11 September 1912 (Fargnoli and Patrick 1995: 145).

Charles Levin and Charles Shattuck looked at it as a series of 15 vignettes (1944: 30), linking the series to Joyce's own confession in May 1906 to his publisher about the "paralysis" covering the whole collection and, then, explaining the stories as a journey focused on four main stages: "childhood, adolescence, maturity and public life" (Ellmann 1975: 83). While inspecting such contributions, this paper attempts to employ resources provided by psychoanalytic criticism and offer a wider interpretation about identity, love and death as illuminating topics in the Joycean universe. Earlier criticism focused on exploring links between Joyce's life and his vision (Magalaner, Kain, 1956; Gilbert, Ellmann 1966; Tindall, 1959; Bowen, Carens, 1984; Bollettieri Bosinelli, Mosher 1998, Bloom 1999), his place in the twentieth-century Irish writing (Garrett 1986; Torchiana, 1986; Beja 1989; Henke 1990), while recent studies provide topical insights (Schwaber 2000, Fargnoli, Gillespie 2006; Sakr 2008, McArdle 2010; Oatley, Djikic et alii 2016, Olivares Merino 2016). As Patrick Parrinder notes in his study, in the years Joyce wrote and waited for *Dubliners* to come into print, symbolism "was a topical and widely discussed literary technique" (Parrinder1984: 51), yet Parrinder rejects the idea launched by Levin and Shattuck about the parallelism to the *Odyssey*. The final story of *Dubliners* can be nevertheless discussed in the light of concepts such as Eros and Thanatos, dream and the use of symbols and metaphors. The main questions I address are: is the party described in the story a genuine communal gathering, or is it meant to foresee mental isolation and annihilation, placing the key

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protagonists at a huge distance from each other, despite their apparent love? And is snow, the final symbolic element covering the city, working as a hint to purification or merely suggesting a world reduced to silence by its own death? This paper employs psychoanalytic criticism for a close reading of the story, inspecting the construct in terms of primary drives, as well as the questionable actions and thoughts of the key protagonists.

1. Background, Opposition and Ambiguity

For *The Dead*, literary sources up to date have explored critical areas around themes, characters, connections between writer's own experience and that of his wife, while opening the debate to psychoanalytical interpretations. This story finds its roots in a genuine incident: Nora Barnacle, Joyce's lover and wife, had had two admirers who died before her encounter with the writer: Michael Feeney and Michael Bodkin (Maddox 1988: 15). As Maddox points out in her account of Nora's life, their affection for each other was straightforward, and each liked in the other a certain wilderness, frankness and complementarity. Young Joyce displayed a certain timidity and used refined language, while Nora had an openness and apparently a certain knowledge of sexual practice, so that she played the role of a *connoisseur*, as confessed by the writer later on ("You were to my young manhood what the idea of the Blessed Virgin was to my boyhood", *ibidem*: 32).

The use of psychoanalytical criticism in Joyce's works has apparently emerged as natural in connection to Joyce's own biography, partly because his daughter, Lucia, was for a while Jung's patient; in addition to that and her father's scepticism towards analysis, it is not only the collection of stories about Dublin characters which opens itself to such interpretation, but later works as well. To test the value of this approach, I will explore the background of the writing, as noted by Stanislaus Joyce, and Joyce biographers, and employ psychoanalytical concepts to reframe the interpretation of this story.

Stanislaus Joyce confessed that his understanding of this story comes from viewing it as

> which represents festive life, serves as a kind of boisterous chorus, which is suddenly interrupted to let the book end on a note of disillusionment and resignation, though not of despair (Pierce 2000: 615).

He also links it to his brother's storytelling ability, and looks at it based on dichotomy, speaking about oppositions and the position of a man as lover and husband. The gendered polarity has been credited, according to him, to two brief epigrams which seemed to have inspired Joyce's thinking: One is: "Every bond is a bond to sorrow" the other reads:

> Love between man and man is impossible because there must not be sexual intercourse, and friendship between man and a woman is impossible because there must be sexual intercourse (Pierce 2000: 616–18).

To enhance this frame, Paul Ricoeur's exploration of the power of metaphor builds on the understanding of bonding and its implications for the people in this narrative. He suggests that the "figure of speech" elicits visual aspects based on

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resemblance, schematization, visualization and a splitting of reference. By doing that, the reader, although absorbed by the imagery, needs to stay away from "wild images" or diversions and interruptions, enjoying "bound images" which incorporate "concrete representations around by the verbal element and controlled by it" (Ricoeur 1978: 150). Gerald Doherty further debates on this, analysing how Gabriel Conroy's representation illustrates the wild type of image as "his face portrait projects a parallel instability, impermanence, nondurability" (Doherty 2004: 148), while Forest L. Ingram hints at the paralysis of the urban background as the key-feature of the place where the action takes place, in "a symbolic wasteland landscape" (Ingram 1971: 33). In contrast, bound images reflect Gabriel's and Gretta's authentic egos, beyond the conventionalism of their social constructs. They are clearly apart throughout the evening, yet Gretta's openness stirs Gabriel and urges him to confront his own demons, and find his own, deep self. He then travels back to the shore of the living, grateful for her germinal insight and feels thus able to use creative vigour to reconnect their memories to the present. Adding to the existing corpus, Garry Martin Leonard elicits femininity as a case of masculinity emerging from the story (1993).

Furthermore, it appears that Jungian psychoanalysis turns into a productive tool, as James Hillman and Sonu Shamdasani show, referring to the *Red Book*: he [Jung] has

> fallen into a stream of images. What then is played out within that stream of images is the conflict between the ancient and the modern, between the pagan and the Christian (Hillman, Shamdasani 2013: 58).

This is exactly what happens in *The Dead*, as the story attempts to decode previous representations of a human's life, in an interplay from ordinary, often ritual, occasionally chaotic elements into what becomes a mixture of conventional and innovative images. Another clue relates to an exchange, the mind being absorbed by the "night" or the world of the spirits and past emotions, creating thus a new world open to the hero experiencing it, which Jung sees as a genuine offering to the night entities (Joyce 2012: 63).

Extreme attitudes, actions and reactions develop in multiple instances throughout the narration. If at the beginning, aunt Kate and aunt Julia, enjoyed "the best of everything", as their students come "from the better-class families on Kingstown and Dalkey line" (Fasano 2008: 5), they quite soon openly declare that they are afraid of a potentially intoxicated Freddy Mallins, a rather boisterous local invited to the feast. The opposition of high versus low Irish social layers is plainly depicted in the description of Freddy Mallins: a man in his forties, with "coarse features, a blunt nose, a convex and receding brow, tumid and protruded lips" (Joyce 2012: 130), while the main character, Gabriel Conroy, is a sophisticated, reflexive and socially-versatile young man. From the onset, the story reveals a hesitant protagonist: Gabriel oscillates between courteous, intellectual postures, but has moments of sharp, commonplace language and behaviour: "Here I am as right as the mail" (*ibidem*: 125) versus his refined intention to use "the lines from Robert Browning" in his toast. He finally opts for "a quotation from Shakespeare or from

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the Melodies" [authored by Thomas Moore] (*ibidem*: 126) as more appropriate for the audience as he ponders upon the choices for his planned speech. Miss Ivors validates his ambiguous back and forth attitude when she declares openly that she has "a crow to pluck" (*ibidem*: 132) with him, and details her resentment as being caused by his editorials for *The Daily Express*, which she reads as an expression of an Anglophile adherence. Gabriel has a moment of indecision, and chooses not to employ "a grandiose phrase" in his forthcoming speech. As a response, he simply blinks and avoids an open confrontation with a woman unable to understand that "literature was above politics" (*ibidem*). Yet Gabriel's ambiguous attitude to others during the story needs a closer inspection than just a mere set of oppositions. It can start from Freud's statement in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that "[t]he study of dreams may be considered the most trustworthy method of investigating deep mental processes" (Freud 1975: 7). This is actually applicable to a sustained dream-like behaviour. According to this interpretation, the debut of the story aligns itself to a vivacious, swift pace of action, while during the party the narrative focuses on observing characters, dialogues and attitudes. Suggested antagonisms reveal personal choices: Gabriel intends to *act* and *coordinate* key moments during the event but lets his own mind being distracted; Gretta, on the contrary, has a continuously equivocal stand, she is of a more clearly pensive disposition than her husband, and therefore there is less duality in her conduct. Gabriel's post-feast erotic drive follows his emotions and physiological reactions:

> 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 (Joyce 2012: 150).

At this stage, the protagonist is euphoric, absorbed by passion via visual, smell, oral and tactile stimuli, in his attempt to make Gretta respond to his sudden ardour:

> But now, after the kindling again of so many memories, the first touch of her body, musical and strange and perfumed, sent through him a keen pang of lust (*ibidem*: 151).

The description of her body works like a chant upon him, a memory and a new journey he looks forward to engaging in. He is only temporarily transported into an extraordinary state of mind beyond attraction and desire; and after he abandons his senses and his rationality, he retrieves a recomposed understanding of his one's existence.

2. Impetus of Love and Death

In his recollection of elements accumulating the background of the story, and its transposition into text, Stanislaus Joyce mentions George Moore's composition, "The Dead" (or "Ye Dead") performed by Plunket Green, and makes reference to another source influencing his brother in the composition of the short story, quoting a cradle-song by Yeats: "The angels are stooping/ Above your white bed;/ They are weary of trooping/ With the whimpering dead" (Torchiana 1986: 223).

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The encounter with the otherworld is suggested at the beginning by the "pantry ceiling" filled by "the stamping and shuffling of feet on the floor above" (Joyce 2012: 125); in the end, Gabriel will accomplish surpass the journey to the territory of the dead, also hinted at by Gretta's obscure presence on the staircase, which will transform him from an ordinary protagonist into an Orpheus able to rescue Eurydice from the land of shadows.

Throughout the story, Gabriel's anxious side is mirrored and enhanced by several descriptive references hinting at an indistinct landscape, close to dreams, where people blend with the surroundings and their silhouettes are absorbed by a wider vision: "[a] light fringe of snow lay like a cape on the shoulders of his overcoat, and like toecaps on the toes of his galoshes" (*ibidem*: 125), or "[t]he snow would be lying on the branches of the trees and forming a bright cap on the top of the Wellington Monument" (*ibidem*: 135). His later toast makes an abrupt reference to elusiveness, but this time vagueness relates to the past in a grandiosely staged tribute to the contributions made by earlier generations:

> Those days might, without exaggeration, be called spacious days: and if they are gone beyond recall let us hope, at least, that in gatherings such as this we shall still speak of them with pride and affection, still cherish in our hearts the memory of those dead and gone great ones whose fame the world will not willingly let die (*ibidem*: 143).

In fact, he simply aims to criticize Miss Ivory, whose attack on his alleged lack of patriotism he cannot pardon. The reference to the past as well as the story of Michael Furey hint at the elusiveness of the human and urban background in the fertile soil on which his erotic drive fights the past and the shadows cast by the presence of the dead. His reaction to Gretta's story and the difference of perception between two personalities, firstly, his nature, focused on the *performance* of the evening, and then that of his wife, absorbed by *memory*, reflects Freud's analysis of sexuality and death beyond elementary biology:

> They [the sexual instincts] are the true life instincts. They operate against the purpose of the other instincts, which leads, by reason of their function, to death; and this fact indicates that there is an opposition between them and the other instincts (Freud 1975: 34).

In addition, snow becomes a metaphor of semen generously thrown upon the city itself, embracing it quietly, in a total manifestation of love:

> It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves (Joyce 2012: 157).

At the same time, snow carries its own ambivalence: open to death and bad omens, snow silencing all creatures to retreat into their homes and burrows, including churches and graveyards, alluding to the young boy haunting Gretta's memories:

> 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 (*ibidem*).

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In this case, snow does not hint at paralysis and alienation, as it is suggested by earlier interpretations based on Joyce's personal correspondence, such as Ingram referring the place where the action takes place, mentioning a "a symbolic wasteland landscape" (Ingram 1971: 33). It is not mere paralysis, it is death itself, suggested by Gabriel Conroy, himself an artist, fearing a permanent loss of creativity inflicted by local conventionalism and intellectual routine. And, despite visible quietness, Gabriel gives way to his desire in what becomes a masculine endeavour to neutralise the snow's fatal effect and the recent devastating impact of Gretta's personal memories. She eventually reveals that her distress is caused by the reference to *The Lass of Aughrim*. This was one of the Western Irish songs Nora Barnacle had sung to the novelist in their first year spent in Trieste, as Maddox notes: "that melancholy song of a servant girl abandoned with a baby by her lover had its own double meaning for them both" (Maddox 1988: 53).

Snow eventually becomes a symbol of personal annihilation and echoes Gabriel's anxiety before his speech as he "leaned his trembling fingers on the tablecloth and smiled nervously at the company" (Joyce 2012: 142), the narrator suggesting the general state of mind via a short descriptive passage:

> People, perhaps, were standing in the snow on the quay outside, gazing up at the lighted windows and listening to the waltz music. The air was pure there. In the distance lay the park where the trees were weighted with snow (*ibidem*).

Snow covers the land like a veil at a funeral; it therefore forecasts the end of any human life, thus becoming a *memento mori* motif.

Close to the end, the protagonist contemplates the idea of his own death as if in a *post coitum* desolated mind-set. Despite his visit into the realm of souls, Gabriel's contemplation does not lead to a fatal act, and the connection with his wife rescues him; Gabriel decides to return to the West, the land of humans. The symbolism of the East being connected to the world of the dead, and the living inhabiting the West is specific to Irish legends (Siwers 2009: 189) where cold, wet and wintry qualities are attached to hell, while heaven is associated with those of summer. In Jungian terminology, the opposition is characteristic to Pleroma, or "fullness and emptiness," where it rests on a series of opposites: the Effective and the Ineffective; Fullness and Emptiness or Living and Dead (Hoeller 1982: 74). However, the reference to snow evoking death is complemented by a dialogue suggesting the contrast between ascetic existence and feasting seen as trivial repletion:

> He was astonished to hear that the monks never spoke, got up at two in the morning and slept in their coffins. He asked what they did it for. […] Freddy Malins explained to him, as best he could, that the monks were trying to make up for the sins committed by all the sinners in the outside world. […] "The coffin, said Mary Jane, is to remind them of their last end" (Joyce 2012: 141).

In fact, symbolism operates throughout the whole narrative, as Thomas Fasano notes about the Gretta-Lily suggestion (Fasano 2008: 63). Gretta for her husband is the main reason for which he ultimately lives on; Gabriel feels "humiliated" by her story, but his frustration is not provoked by a masculine jealousy over a dead figure but by Gretta herself, the rather still yet fully vibrant presence:

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> There was grace and mystery in her attitude as if she were a symbol of something. He asked himself what is a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow, listening to distant music, a symbol of. If he were a painter he would paint her in that attitude. Her blue felt hat would show off the bronze of her hair against the darkness and the dark panels of her skirt would show off the light ones. *Distant Music* he would call the picture if he were a painter (Joyce 2012: 147–8).

Although Gabriel loves and admires her, he essentially thinks of himself as a potentially visionary artist, while Gretta simply carries on with her *life*, unlike her young ambitious husband. As Gerald Doherty observed (Doherty 2004), based on Ricoeur's discussion upon "wild" and "bound" images, this fragment is a vibrant portrayal, and the earlier act of entertaining guests and enjoying the feast makes Gabriel later look for sensual fulfilment. Through her husband's eyes, Gretta's profile acquires the stillness and gracefulness of an enigmatic sculpture:

> A woman was standing near the top of the first flight, in the shadow also. He could not see her face but he could see the terracotta and salmon-pink panels of her skirt which the shadow made appear black and white. It was his wife. She was leaning on the banisters, listening to something (Joyce 2012: 147).

Her profile is in sharp contrast with the brief description of a painting in which Constantine, Ellen Conroy's other son, presents a conventional posture. Yet for Kerstin Shands the staircase is a core symbolic element linking departures and arrivals of protagonists participating in the feast, a new hint at the old legend of Oedipus answering three riddles: "it leads up to bedrooms, to ecstasy, sleep and death" (Bueno, Caesar et alii 2000: 246). From this perspective, the sexual drive experienced by Gabriel is observed by the narrator and paralleled by Gretta's earlier obscure profile and her plunge into a deep sleep. Her recollection of her unfulfilled romance takes the couple into a new perception of life and death: Gretta falls into a restorative sleep, while her husband plunges himself into a new encounter with spiritual entities, an unexpected reunion allowing him to grasp a new meaning for his own existence.

3. Banquet and Heroes: One Event, Multiple Clashes

Gabriel's existential disillusionment is in stark contrast to the banquet he had enjoyed. The display of viands, fruit and luxurious ingredients, detailed in terms of shapes, colours and size, build up this image of a Pantagruelian feast. Solid food and drinks are presented in a panorama upon the table, with the lens moving slowly at a time when the cinema was still in its infancy. Ordinary adjectives and nouns are employed to this end: "fat brown goose," "red jam," leaf-shaped dish," "purple raisins" etc., versus more sophisticated terms, pointing to refined tastes and manners, for instance "blancmange," "Smyrna figs" (Joyce 2012: 138) while liquid containers are aligned as ready for a long and difficult battle. It is a complex ceremonial with traditional food varieties, sweets and an assortment of beverages, confirming intense preparations, and the efforts of the hosts to indulge their guests and make the evening a memorable occasion. For Gabriel, feeding acquires thus the symbolic meaning of a communal gathering, acceptance and valorisation of his intellectual gifts, while sexual impulses are to bring him a re-bonding with his wife.

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If the first is fulfilled, the second fails surprisingly, as he experiences a lack of union and communication with his spouse.

At the same time, Joyce, the writer, indulges in a rather transparent aesthetic approach: beautiful, enigmatic women are to be loved. They are ideal muses and companions for young affluent Dubliners, while Miss Ivory represents a category he dismisses: the virgin, learned, upper-class female receptive to clichés and lacking originality. Social differentiation actually raises the perspective of frustration infusing the story. In line with Melanie Klein's post-Freudian analysis, this is caused by various kinds of deprivations children undergo in early years; in Gabriel's case, it is generated by what Klein calls the "successful adaptation to reality" (Mitchell 1986: 59–60), which in the first part of the story concentrates on the fulfilment of his social and intellectual role. He even perceives a temporary satisfaction: "The blood went bounding along his veins; and the thoughts went rioting through his brain, proud, joyful, tender, valorous" (Joyce 2012: 150). But it does not last long, the sudden reference to the *Lass of Aughrim* tune takes the spouses to the past, and Gretta's evocation of a former admirer generates an emotional deprivation Gabriel cannot manage. Their hotel room suddenly opens up an invisible gate to the underworld, and the grey light and the mirror suggest the possibility to suspend reality and confront undistinguishable entities:

> A ghostly light from the street lamp lay in a long shaft from one window to the door. […] She had taken off her hat and cloak and was standing before a large swinging mirror, unhooking her waist […]. She turned away from the mirror slowly and walked along the shaft of light towards him (*ibidem*: 152).

Gabriel feels embarrassed by his sexual arousal, and is bothered by their separation of feelings and reactions. Instead of a close communion, he faces perplexity and this reality comes to be unbearable, yet he calls on his inner strength to grasp the meaning of those past memories. He then carries out a personal examination, which reveals a systematic and alert mind, able to engage in an empirical analysis:

> From what had it proceeded? From his aunt's supper, from his own foolish speech, from the wine and dancing, the merry-making when saying good-night in the hall, the pleasure of the walk along the river in the snow (*ibidem*: 156).

The effort takes him into a new position, the adaptation to a "new" reality:

> While he had been full of memories of their secret life together, full of tenderness and joy and desire, she had been comparing him in her mind with another. A shameful consciousness of his own person assailed him. He saw himself as a ludicrous figure, acting as a pennyboy for his aunts, a nervous, well-meaning sentimentalist, orating to vulgarians and idealising his own clownish lusts, the pitiable fatuous fellow he had caught a glimpse of in the mirror (*ibidem*: 154).

In the end, he overcomes his own arrogance and intellectual *mimesis*, and learns from his wife how to look at past memories with a fresh, personal yet enhanced vision, and see his own actions, as well as those of the dearest mortal next to him, in a way that he seemed incapable of at the beginning, following an authentic contemplation:

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> He thought of how she who lay beside him had locked in her heart for so many years that image of her lover's eyes when he had told her that he did not wish to live (*ibidem*: 156–7).

He evicts the misery of the banquet because he takes the revisiting of memories as a most intimate moment which works both as a privilege and mystical growth. This unexpected twist casts a fresh interpretation on the story: Gabriel as shown at the end is a completely different person to the man portrayed at the opening; he detaches himself from mannerism and predictable functions and focuses his whole being on the essence of love and human existence, sublimating his lust and converting it into a mental state associated with a new life beginning.

4. Conclusion

Looked upon by critics as an epiphany, *The Dead* stands out as a Joycean blend of ingredients in which the festive party acquires multiple layers and meanings for the modern reader: deep cultural values versus learned shallowness, superiority versus humanity, journeys mixing life and death, and exterior appearances versus psychological transformation. The banquet takes place during once evening, but its reverberations and effects extend long after the main characters have left it. When employing the series of psychoanalytic concepts such as the sexual instinct and death drive; wild and bound images; dream-like-reality; and emotional deprivation, similar to the infantile cases, the narrative opens itself up to ambiguity and transformation as both sources of pleasure and sorrow for the main protagonists. Heroes and symbols often find their correspondence in reality, the background of the city, the meaning of the events and perceptions delivered in the story cover both direct and indirect attitudes: frankness and intellectual pride, hospitality, sexual drive, frustration and deprivation, death and detachment, in an ample, fluid and fluent narrative, embracing the reader in a compact and eclectic structure. The finale, parallel to an awakening symbolically adopted by Gabriel Conroy, can be read as a victory of life over distanced, absorbing spirits: Gretta's sleep may be seen as a temporary and incomprehensible union with the past, and the reference to "what she must have been then" (Joyce 2012: 156) hints to a silent obituary for the passage of time upon one's ephemeral physical attractiveness.

There is no demarcation line between social classes in terms of character, honesty and intensity of feelings, except for what early twentieth-century conventions imposed upon fictional players engaged in social functions in this memorable night: servants, aunts, young or old ladies, gentlemen, sons and mothers, lovers, or simply put: *the living* and *the dead*.

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Abstract

Published in 1914, "The Dead" is the longest piece in *The Dubliners*, closing the collection as the last piece. The current paper aims to explore how personal experience and elements extracted from the Irish imagery lead towards a new interpretation supported by psychoanalytical criticism, starting with the Freudian concepts of Eros and Thanatos or life as a dream in fiction. Desire, actions and reactions are read alongside the Jungian concepts, the Kleinian approach on frustration and the power of metaphor (Ricoeur, 1978).

Alternating between social functions, deep interior anxiety and intense erotic drive, Gabriel Conroy falls from the gaiety of an ordinary reunion into the abyss of despair and contemplation of death. Is the party described in the story, looked at from this perspective, a genuine communal gathering, or is it rather meant to foresee mental isolation and annihilation, placing key protagonists at huge distance from each other, despite their apparent love? And is snow, the final symbolic element covering the city, working as a hint to purification or only one suggesting a world reduced to silence by its own death?

At the end, Gabriel and his wife, Gretta, become isolated entities when compared to their arrival at the venue of the banquet, when Gretta's seductive profile evokes the peacefulness of a mysterious figurine. The narrative contrasts the extrovert expression of desire experienced by the male character with the outburst of feelings, memories, and exhaustion perceived by Gretta. She plunges into deep sleep, being watched by her husband, which links the manifestations of the couple to the Freudian stages of sexual instincts. The finale shows the solitarily-portrayed hero undergoing a profound transformation, surpassing his erotic dissatisfaction while becoming immersed in an encounter with entities from the otherworld. Transcending his earthy impulses, the protagonist detaches from the shallowness of his own self, and gains a deeper meaning, which allows him to reframe his own life journey further on.

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