

Tim Anderson

5/29/2012

ENGL 342

### Synthesis of Loss and Gain: Mechanics of Epiphany in James Joyce's "The Dead"

The secular word "depression" is our age's closest approximation to the spiritual word "despair", and as one is a state of mind and the other a state of the soul, we are perhaps relieved to find our depressions lifted through various means even while the pall of despair looms ever-present, though at a distance just far enough away for us to be able to forget about it. One is tempted to characterize James Joyce's story, "The Dead"—and the entire collection in which it occurs—as "depressing" and, as a consequence, to go out and buy a new set of clothes. Indeed, it could be said that despair is the thread common to all the tales in *Dubliners*. It is most keenly felt in the final story only because Gabriel Conroy, in his insecurity and hyperawareness, is the one character in *Dubliners* most capable of the inward gaze generally awarded to the reader—the result being that the reader is invited to look inside Gabriel as he looks inside himself, finding much less than he anticipated, to his great misfortune. But I maintain that this is only one way to read "The Dead." It follows not from a misreading of the text, but from a certain understanding of the Joycean epiphany—a predominately "masculinist-imperialist" understanding (to borrow the term from Gayatri Spivak) and one which has at its root (to borrow a definition of the term from Vincent J. Cheng) "the conjoined dynamics of empire and sexual colonization" (Cheng, 348). I distinguish my reading this way: While Cheng combs the text of "The Dead" from a

particular angle and with a particular set of tools, I will be applying this set of tools to better understand the concept of epiphany around which the text is framed. Only then can this complex short story's ending be teased out from its classic interpretation: that what Gabriel experiences is complete despair, and the reader a momentary or prolonged depression (depending on how much one ruminates), and that this is somehow *truth*, as is implicated within the word "epiphany." Though I risk sounding overly relativistic, I do believe that the truth in Joyce's story depends upon the perspective from which we look. The epiphany may indeed encourage a subjective gaze, and one that comes *outside* Gabriel's actual perception. Following this premise, my focused target of attack is the idea that, by the story's conclusion, Gabriel *loses*.

The Joycean epiphany, while talked about often and located in several stories, defies a very succinct understanding. It is elusive and malleable, somehow able to justify several critics' usage and yet still leave something to be desired. It is the product of just the sort of perspicacious writer who provides academics with enough clarity to get them excited and enough ambiguity to make them doubt what they have seen. Simply put, the Joycean epiphany could have several meanings and, depending on how it's used, alter one's understanding of what it does within any of Joyce's stories. Joyce himself may have conceived of the epiphany this way:

By epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself. He believed that it was for the man of letters to record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments...The moment the focus is reached the effect is epiphanized. It is just in this epiphany that I find the tried, the supreme quality of beauty. (Stephen Hero, 211)

The problem with this definition is that it belongs to Stephen Dedalus; as Zack Bowen points out, “Joyce critics have tended to discount the idea that Stephen’s aesthetic theory in *A Portrait of the Artist* was necessarily that of James Joyce when he was writing the book,” (Bowen, 104). Though several of Joyce’s explorations into aesthetic theory, worked out in detail in his notebook, found their way into *A Portrait of the Artist*, it becomes impossible to tell whether or not Joyce holds the same ideas as Stephen once he writes them into a fiction. It becomes impossible to tell whether one of Stephen’s great epiphanies might even be the epiphany concerning the failure of his theory of epiphanies. It should also be noted that this definition remains obscure, and for our purposes, gives us little with which to understand “The Dead.” In quoting Robert Scholes, Bowen suggests that we could see epiphanies “as a mere stage in the developing thought of Stephen Dedalus” (Bowen, 103). In this case we can only wonder what exactly they are doing in *Dubliners*; the existence of epiphanies begins to seem dubitable.

Another complication to the matter involves the element of spiritual truth associated with the epiphany. If they (epiphanies) are a character’s illumination and revelation of his own inadequacy, as is generally assumed within Aristotelian recognition, they deal “with points of observable fact rather than psychological insight” (Bowen, 105). The gaining of self-knowledge which we like to call an epiphany must come from a character’s ability to weigh himself against some external standard which as always been present. This may help us understand Gabriel from “The Dead,” as he is certainly capable of this (perhaps this is all he does throughout the story), but it is doubtful that *all* of the characters found in *Dubliners* have the mental acuity to do so. Even more vexing is that the acquisition of “truth” is an epistemic concern and a problem of knowing, a problem of knowing that one knows the truth—it is doubtful that a character can know whatever spiritual truth has been imparted is actually true; it is a problem for readers to

know that the insight which the character has gained about himself is true about the character. A good deal of *assuming* goes on about what has descended from on high. This, I think, is why the question of what Gabriel learns through epiphany has so many varying interpretations.

Now I have briefly covered the debate of what an epiphany is in order find an entryway for my own theory. I'm sure I have one, though I can't be sure where it came from or whether or not it is correct. In a preliminary form it could be named the "masculinist-imperialist epiphany," though in its true state it ceases to be fettered by these terms. First I will attempt to explain what it is; afterwards, how exactly it could be viewed as "masculinist-imperialist," and finally, how it works within "The Dead."

My conception of epiphany stems out of Joyce's own aesthetic writes from his Paris Notebook:

Desire is the feeling which urges us to go to something and loathing is the feeling which urges us to go from something: and that art is improper which aims at exciting these feelings in us whether by comedy or tragedy. Of comedy later. But tragedy aims at exciting in us feelings of pity and terror. Now terror is the feeling which arrests us before whatever is grave in human fortunes and unites us with its secret cause and pity is the feeling which arrests us before whatever is grave in human fortunes and unites us with the human sufferer.

Loathing...urges us from rest because it urges us to go from something, but terror and pity hold us in rest, as it were by fascination... [An art is not] properly tragic which would move me to prevent human suffering any more than an art is properly tragic which would move me in anger against some manifest cause of human suffering. Terror and pity, finally, are aspects of sorrow comprehended in sorrow—the feeling which the privation of some good excites in us.

Desire, as I have said, is the feeling which urges us to go to something but joy is the feeling which the possession of some good excites in us...For desire urges us

from rest that we might possess something but joy holds us in rest so long as we possess something. (*Critical Writings*, 144)

An aspect of the epiphany is that it holds us within terror, pity, or joy, as Joyce defines above. But this is not what I would call a full epiphany—this must come later. Now what is most notable about Joyce’s aesthetics is that it is hinged upon possession and loss. When held at rest within terror, pity, or joy we are held at rest within loss and possession; but both have the other close at hand—what is terrifying or pitiable about the moment of loss is the understanding of what had previously been gained. The moment of possession is likewise haunted by the threat of loss. A work of art, to Joyce, must hold us at rest in one of these, but an epiphany, to me, must hold us in all three.

The language of this epiphany theory has masculinist-imperialist anxieties written all over it. The ideas of loss and possession, specifically, have endured many years of feminist criticism and many more years of reification into the collective consciousness which compel us to understand “The Dead” and the epiphany in these stark terms, unnecessarily. It happens to be particularly male-oriented. And this is a problem.

“The Dead” moves through a series of escalating challenges to Gabriel Conroy’s manhood. Cheng writes that Gabriel is a “well-meaning patriarch who is almost a domestic tyrant” (Cheng, 349). While sympathetic, Gabriel patronizes women to a degree that “suggests...an essentializing of the female in a form of infantilization” (Cheng, 349). In his interaction with Lily, the caretaker’s daughter, Gabriel alludes to her sexuality, inquiring whether he would “be going to [her] wedding one of these fine days...” (*Dubliners*, 144)—which is perhaps a question he has no business asking; indeed, he is embarrassed by her assertive response, blushes, and realizing his transgression, attempts to make up for it with the gold coin,

“buying her off by imposing his dominance in a different field of mastery in which he can still hold sovereignty, that of relative wealth and power” (Cheng, 352). It is important, however, to point out that Gabriel runs away. After putting the coin in Lily’s hand he ascends the stairs, leaving her unable to refuse him a second time. Here his self-concept remains intact, having only been shaken, and for the time being he turns his thoughts towards the dinner speech, thereby reminding himself of the qualities he finds so admirable about himself: his literariness, his education. He wrestles with which English author to quote in his speech “for he feared [Robert Browning] would be over the heads of his hearers” (*D*, 155). And it is not mere coincidence that Miss Ivors attacks these very qualities inexorably during the dancing scene. By accusing Gabriel of being a “West Briton” (*D*, 165), Miss Ivors comments on Gabriel’s lack of conviction to Ireland and his allegiance with England—his allegiance, basically, with imperialism. But that this backlash comes from a woman intensifies the nature of the attack. To assert himself in the quarrel between England and Ireland, Gabriel must assert himself over Miss Ivors—she becomes the space over which the battle is fought. Gabriel’s speech, in which he criticizes the younger, “very serious and hyper-educated generation” (*D*, 167), contains not only his response to Ivors’s accusations, but his response to Miss Ivors herself who, being a woman, must be returned to subservience before Gabriel’s manhood can be reaffirmed.

Mostly because I find her theories to be both accurate and fair, I choose to elucidate this matter using Simone de Beauvoir’s writings. In *The Second Sex* she writes, “In woman is incarnated in positive form the lack that the existent carries in his heart, and it is in seeking to be made whole through her that the man hopes to attain self-realization (*The Second Sex*, 142). Her perhaps one of the founding motivations of masculinist-imperialist ideology can be found: the attempt to be made whole by acquiring the Other. Beauvoir highlights the intention of the

existent to “fulfill himself by reducing the Other to slavery” and the true cost of renouncing all possession”: the loss he might feel, “unable to fulfill himself in solitude” (140).

The theoretical scaffolding on which the epiphany is contingent directly involves the loss and gain of the object Other; and it is fascinating when such a framework is applied to a story like “The Dead,” in which the content mirrors the device used to investigate it.

The narrative builds toward the epiphany scene at the story’s end, where, having endured a night filled with affronts to his masculinity, Gabriel encounters the one affront from which he can’t escape: the loss of his wife to her dead lover from the gasworks. The epiphany scene *could* be as follows:

While he had been 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 wellmeaning sentimentalist, orating to vulgarians and idealizing his own clownish lusts, the pitiable fatuous fellow he had caught a glimpse of in the mirror. Instinctively he turned his back to the light lest she might see the shame that burned upon his forehead. (*D*, 191)

As insight into his own failures this could be considered the epiphany; Gabriel suffers the great loss of himself with the simultaneous loss of Gretta, the object Other who, in a Beauvoir-ian sense, he needed to possess and own in order to be fulfilled. By following Joyce’s own art theory this could be considered a tragedy—we are held in a moment of pity for Gabriel (as he is a sympathetic character, we recognize ourselves in him) and terror (for we are implicated along with him, his loss is our own). Here is where many a reader comes off feeling depressed from

“The Dead,” and where many get off by labeling Gabriel a loser, no doubt in an attempt to increase the distance between the reader and tragic loss.

But consider the perspective from which Gabriel sees: unlike Aristotle’s recognition, he is not merely looking inside himself objectively, but rather, he is seeing himself as Gretta sees him. In his looking at Gretta, Gabriel sees her as an object, but in looking at himself, he sees himself as the object of Gretta’s look. The result of such a process is Gabriel’s recognition of Gretta’s status as a subject—as J.M. Coetzee writes, “Before the subjecthood of the Other-who-looks can be realized, however, one must have the experience of being the object of the Other’s look. This realization arrives not as an abstract, logical deduction, but in an unbidden moment of transition...with shame” (*Giving Offense*, 70). The epiphany here is the realization of the subjecthood of the Other—in seeing oneself through the gaze of the Other it is not the objective truth of the self which one sees, but the being of oneself through another’s eyes. The epiphany cannot, as a rule, fail to introduce to one the Other-as-subject nor can the self remain ensconced within its own perspective—it must see itself from an external point of view. This has been the narrative drive all along, and for readers, the greatest interpretive struggle consists in explaining the significance of this turn—those who see the epiphany primarily as loss perhaps mourn the stripping of a masculinist gaze—a delusion, a desperate clinging to the self.

But “generous tears fill Gabriel’s eyes” (*D*, 149); in recognizing his complete loss of Gretta, he also gains a new insight into who she might really be, and this is in fact Gabriel’s *triumph*.

“It is possible,” Beauvoir writes, “to rise above this conflict if each individual freely recognizes the other, each regarding himself and the other as simultaneously object and subject in a reciprocal manner...it requires man to outdo himself at every moment” (*The Second Sex*,

140). Gabriel's loss allows him the deepest vision, perhaps an opportunity for redemption. This is in full what I consider the Joycean epiphany to be: the synthesis of one's complete loss and the possession of loss, the deepening of understanding that only comes when the self is stripped bare.

## Works Cited

- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Trans. H.M. Parshley. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1952.
- Bowen, Zack. "Joyce and the Epiphany Concept: A New Approach." *Journal of Modern Literature*. 9.1. 1989. 103-114.
- Cheng, Vincent J. "Empire and Patriarchy in 'The Dead.'" *Joyce, Race, and Empire*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1995. 128-147.
- Coetzee, J.M. "The Harms of Pornography: Catharine MacKinnon." *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. 61-82.
- Joyce, James. *Critical Writings*. London: Faber and Faber, 1959.
- . *Dubliners*. New York: Norton, 2006.
- . *Stephen Hero*. Ed. Theodore Spencer. New York: New Directions, 1944.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1998. 271-313.