

FILM

The Dead (1914)

James Joyce (Irish)

(1882-1941)

adaptation by John Huston (1987)

ANALYSIS

“*The Dead* stands among Huston’s most glorious achievements.... If we are thinking of *The Dead* as Huston’s meditation on his own approaching death, we will be moved by Gabriel’s humility and his solemn eloquence... The images of the Irish wasteland that he imagines are images of his spirit.... If we see Gabriel as a surrogate for Huston, we must also see as an emblem for the director the camera soaring outward from his mind into the universe....

Comparison to Joyce’s ‘The Dead’ reveals that much of the dialogue of Huston’s movie is rewritten and some is added. A crucial character and incident, Mr. Grace and his recitation, are created from whole cloth; also added is the nascent romance between Bartell D’Arcy (Frank Patterson) and Miss O’Callaghan; various existing characters are increased or diminished in importance; significant imagery augments that which already exists in the story.... Mr. Grace is the sole major character that Huston and his son Tony, the credited screenwriter, added to Joyce’s story; his name underscores the emotional abundance of the poem he introduces....

The camera remains mostly independent... Generally, indeed, it maintains its independence from any of the characters. With its mobility, energy, and initiative, the camera in effect functions as the central character in the film.... Like a character, the camera is frequently blocked by guests who cross in front of it; at one point, it threads its way through dancers, following Freddy as he goes to his mother.... We recall Huston remarking that he did not generally wish his audiences to identify with particular characters but ‘with the picture itself’...

Like many of Huston’s films, *The Dead* depends equally upon sharp montage and the long takes and deep focus of *mis en scene*. It is a motion picture full of motion. When the camera is still and the editing leisurely, the frame is full of moving figures; when the figures are still, the camera moves and the pace of the editing is likely to increase....The four-hundred-odd shots of the narrative average about eleven seconds, but very few individual shots are of average length. Huston’s sense of rhythm is evident in the lively, varied pacing of the narrative and in the cinematography and editing. The greater part of running time is occupied by long takes, often sustained through multiple camera movements.... While her singing continues on the sound track, seven successive dissolves among Julia’s personal mementos serve to compendiate her life in lyrical synecdoche.... Colors are muted by dim light....

The mythological overtones of the dark water and the crossing suggest a journey toward the land of the dead... Like dance, music had double associations with life and with mortality. D’Arcy’s singing of ‘The Lass of Aughrim’ recalls for Gretta the long dead Michael Furey, who sang the same song; a current production of ‘Mignon’ reminds Mary Jane of a young soprano who died.... Gabriel and Gretta are doubled by their shadows, images that suggest both their own pasts and a future when they, like everyone else, will be shades.... Of significance is the evocation in a single image of past, present, and future, and the remarkable multiplication of meaning and emotional intensity that Huston achieves with the utmost economy of image and word....

The representation of love and the conflict between men and women ranges from expressions of sexual cynicism to the matrimonial romanticism in Aunt Julia’s rendition of Bellini’s ‘Arrayed for the Bridal’; from the mild antagonism mixed with flirtatiousness that Molly Ivors directs toward Gabriel to the intensity

in Mr. Grace's recitation of "Broken Vows" and in D'Arcy's singing. Within all variations, love is to some degree entwined with loss or betrayal.... Somewhere between straightforward sex and idealized amorous passion is the portrayal of the possible start of a romance between D'Arcy and Miss O'Callaghan.... He sings to her, as he apparently declined to do for the company at large, and the two leave the party together.... Gretta hardly notices Gabriel's jealousy and never confirms his suspicion beyond saying "I was great with him then"... Only her revelation that Michael Furey died long ago cancels Gabriel's jealous fantasy about her wanting to go to Galway to see her old lover.... Gabriel belongs to a class, of which he is the most sympathetic member, of self-absorbed, emotionally starved figures who crop up repeatedly in Huston's films....

His camera creates as well as records the community of the film. The depth of characterization in *The Dead* comes largely from visual data, from group and individual cinematographic portraiture and from the frequent tracking and cutting that rearranges figures into different clusters and shows them from different angles.... In addition to groups of three with their traditional power to splinter romantic sexual love, cultural conflicts separate people along broad social lines. England and the Continent are set against Ireland, usually to the disadvantage of the last.... The presence of Mr. Brown raises another distinction among the members of the party, that between majority Catholics and those Mary Jane delicately calls 'of the other persuasion'.... [Huston] shows the members of the party as clear about little concerning their sects except their power to separate people through labels and antagonisms.... Most of the Dubliners look down on the less cosmopolitan people and culture of the western Irish countryside.... Against divisive energies of nationality, city-country antagonisms, personal triangles, or class status are set the unifying influences of social ceremony and art. Most obvious is the dinner party itself, with its dances, its singing of 'for they are jolly good fellows,' and other congenial rituals....

Among the images adopted from Joyce's story is that of snow, with which the movie begins and ends. Indeed, the opening shot of *The Dead* quietly sets forth most of the imagery to which the central meanings of the film adhere: snow, horse-drawn cabs, people in groups, and—through the windows—dance. After briefly going into the house, the camera returns to the showy street, an action that it will repeat during the dinner, again as Gabriel and his wife Greta (Angelica Huston) go through snowy roads to their hotel, and finally during Gabriel's internal monologue, the last sequence of *The Dead*... The traditional association of snow with dissolution intensifies as the film proceeds. The opening subtitle sets the wintry scene in 1904, a time from which none of its characters could have survived to ours. Later the camera goes outside into the snow at the beginning of dinner, then returns through a dissolve that suggests passing time. Snow is visually echoed by a pattern on flecks against a dark background on the dining room walls, and Gretta's story of Michael Furey's death beings, 'T'was in the winter, the beginning of winter.' In the last sequence, the snow that 'is general' over Ireland becomes the central emblem of passing time and death."

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John Huston's Filmmaking
(Cambridge U 1997) 208-26