

Dublin 1904: Conflict in 'The Dead'

Amsterdam Museum Journal

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Discipline

Comparative Literature

Keywords

Colonialism / Futurity / Joyce / Landmarks

Doi

doi.org/10.61299/3n_c141

Issue #1 Fall 2023

Abstract

In recent years, there has been growing interest in the role of futurity and hope in memory studies. This paper contributes to this conversation by examining futurity in a city marked by colonial conflict in the context of “The Dead”, the final short story from *Dubliners* by James Joyce. Drawing on discursive analysis, I argue that the postcolonial writer can rewrite the city, ripe for a new and unknown future. To support this argument, I analyze layers of the colonized urban space. Specifically, I look at the Wellington monument and the statue of Daniel O’Connell. Through this analysis, I demonstrate that futurity is an ambiguous concept capable of holding all possible iterations of the future after conflict. This paper contributes to ongoing debates about surpassing the current focus within memory studies on traumatic memories by drawing on research on hope, as it is life-affirming and inherently future-oriented, by Ann Rigney, and David P. Rando. In addition, it challenges conventional readings of conflict and trauma by extending hope to the dead. Thus, it exhibits how death helps to conceptualize an unknown future.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in futurity and hope within memory studies. James Joyce's "The Dead", from *Dubliners*, provides a helpful context for exploring these themes as the story grapples with the complexities of memory and its role in shaping culture and society.

By situating "The Dead" within the broader contexts of hope, trauma studies, and postcolonialism, we can gain a deeper understanding of Joyce's portrayal of the relationship between the past, present, and future and how memory is depicted as both a source of pride and shame. By examining these themes in "The Dead", I aim to shed light on the nuanced ways literature remembers and copes with traumatic histories and consider the potential for hope as an open-ended future in the waning days of colonialism.

For this analysis, I start by laying out the historical and cultural context of Dublin in 1904, the year "The Dead" is set. Here I outline what I posit in my close reading, namely, that colonialism, even when not physically violent, is a form of constant conflict and psychological warfare. From there, I continue with a close reading of the Dublin of "The Dead". In particular, I will concentrate on how colonial rule looms over the city through two landmarks. I will then argue Joyce rewrites the colonial city and analyze how the form of "The Dead" works to narrativize our understanding of these themes. Finally, I will situate my argument in ongoing debates in memory studies.

By considering these themes, I want to offer insights into the insidiousness of colonial rule in the city and the ways in which postcolonial literature conceptualizes open-ended futures after colonial conflict.

Dublin, 1904

"The Dead" is set in 1904. Joyce will return to this year for *Ulysses*, in which, as Enda Duffy argues, he will saturate it with everything that leads up to it and everything that will come to pass by 1921, when he finished writing (81). It was a relatively uneventful year that fell almost in the middle of the fall of Stewart Parnell, a protestant Irish nationalist who started the last peaceful movement for independence from Britain in the 1870s until the 1890s, and the 1916 Easter Uprising led by Republicans (Duffy 82).

Although, as mentioned, 1904 was politically uneventful, I want to make clear that Dublin and all of Ireland were colonized at this time and that uneventful by no means equals peace. From the early English claims to Ireland in the Middle Ages until Ireland's independence in 1921 (Crooks 460), the colonization of Ireland was brutal and bloody (Foster 506). Of course, the years after independence were also war-torn, but for the pur-

poses of this paper, I will not currently be exploring this period. Instead, I will briefly explain how Dublin became the Dublin of "The Dead".

Much of the seventeenth century had been taken up by war and rebellion (Foster 36-166). Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, England honed the colonial model it would use in Canada, Australia, and India in Ireland. The native Irish population was seen as inferior to English protestants and treated accordingly, replete with the genocide of Gael people and their beliefs and culture (Rahman et al. 17-18). As the British Empire expanded across the globe, so did its colonial model. Urban planning became an important arm of the colonial apparatus: a way to both control the population and replace native cultures (Home and King 52). This form of remote rule was established during the Protestant Ascendancy, the period of settlement and establishing dominance of the Anglo-Irish, from the 1730s until the 1790s (Fraser 102).

Take, for example, the establishment of the four courts. The four courts were built in the late eighteenth century towards the end of the Ascendancy (Spurr 26). Before the Ascendancy, Brehon law had been used outside of the Pale, the base of British Rule in Ireland (Corráin 59). The courts came to be seen as a provocation by the protestant population during the 1798 uprising of the United Irishmen (Spurr 26). Just over a hundred years later, Joyce writes oppression onto the building: "The lamps were still burning redly in the murky air and, across the river, the palace of the Four Courts stood out menacingly against the heavy sky". (210). The scene is heavy and expresses the city's affliction in 1904: physical conflict has turned inwards and is constantly psychologically oppressive.

Joyce wrote "The Dead" in 1907, after his stay in Rome (Ellmann 243). In the years between 1904 and 1907, anti-colonial sentiment was brewing back in Ireland. Micheal Laffan points out that organizers of the Easter Uprising were doing so as far back as the turn of the century (Laffan 34). 1904 saw the release of *The Resurrection of Hungary: A Parallel for Ireland* by Arthur Griffith (Duffy 82), and with that, the establishment of Griffith as a public person and forming the basis for the foundation of Sinn Féin in 1906 (*The 'Sinn Féin' policy* 22-3). In 1906, Joyce wrote to Stanislaus about Griffith commending Griffith's work. Similarly to writing 1904 for *Ulysses*, he imbues "The Dead" with his knowledge of Dublin's future.

W. B. Yeats theorizes on this psychological inversion of physical conflict in the period from Parnell's fall until the Easter Uprising:

"The modern literature of Ireland, and indeed all that stir of thought which prepared for the Anglo-Irish war, began when Parnell fell from power in 1891. A disillusioned and embittered Ireland turned from parliamentary politics; an event was conceived; and the race began, as I think, to be troubled by that event's long gestation" (Yeats).

This is the time in which Joyce wrote and the period that forms the backdrop to "The Dead". When this paper speaks of colonial oppression it speaks of the bloody conflicts of the past and the war that looms ahead because colonization means constant conflict.

Dublin of "The Dead"

On the 6th of January, the Feast of the Epiphany, Gabriel Conroy, the protagonist, and his wife, Gretta, go to a dinner party at his aunt's house. Gabriel will give the big speech at dinner, and by the end of the night, he will have an epiphany in which he will come to see life, death, and Ireland in a new light. The city, the country, and all their historical layers are shrouded under a thick blanket of snow. Throughout "The Dead", we see a dialectic between Irish nationalism and colonial paralysis in Dublin unfold. The story oscillates between pride and shame in the identity of a colonized space. England is represented by the East, and Ireland by the West. Until the epiphany, we are held in a liminal space, constantly going back and forth between these tensions.

As explored in the previous section, the nature of Britain's colonial power in Ireland in 1904 is equally liminal. The colonial conflict of the early twentieth century in Dublin was insidiously oppressive. Resistance is brewing, and violence looms ahead, but the conflict central to the city is psychological. Generations of Dubliners have grown up in a city designed to oppress them, an urban space marred by hundreds of years of war, rebellion, and genocide (Rahman et al. 17-18).

Joyce portrays the profound effects of oppression in the colonized urban space. All of Dublin's layers and landmarks in "The Dead" unfold with meaning when examined closely. In the following close reading, I will focus on the behaviorism between Gabriel and two statues, 'The Wellington Monument' and 'The Liberator'. Conroy is not haunted by these figures; he is possessed by them. He is a conflicted Irishman and quarrels with Molly Ivors, an Irish nationalist, over whether or not he is a West Briton, at one point blurting out that he is "sick of [his] country" (204). Yet in his speech,

he notes his pride and shame in the Irish tradition of hospitality (200). Here, he touches on the conflict of an Irish tradition: "It is a tradition that is unique as far as my experience goes [...] among the modern nations. Some would say, perhaps, that with us it is rather a failing than anything to be boasted of" (200). Here Gabriel is both proud of Ireland whilst simultaneously subjugating it to its own history.

Twice the nerves of his upcoming speech make Gabriel think of the Wellington Monument. The monument is an obelisk that represents British rule (Spurr 33). It stands in honor of Arthur Wellesley, later the Duke of Wellington, an Anglo-Irish general and politician (Haythornthwaite xi). From 1797 until 1805, Wellesley served as a commander for the empire in India (Haythornthwaite xi-ii). In India, Wellington would have enforced the same colonial model that oppressed his countrymen (Rahman et al. 17-18). The first time Gabriel thinks of the monument, he wishes he could be there: "The snow would be lying on the branches of the trees and forming a bright cap on the top of the Wellington Monument. How much more pleasant it would be there than at the supper-table" (189). Here Gabriel wishes to flee from the very Irish tradition he will soon praise in his speech. The meaning of Wellington in this moment is the paralysis, which *Dubliners* has long symbolized (Rando 53). To Gabriel, his native traditions are inferior, they have, to his mind, led to his subjugation. And thus, he wishes to escape it, which only leads him back to the source of his subjugation.

After the party, Gabriel, Gretta, and two other party guests, Bartell D'Arcy and Miss O'Callaghan, make their way by cab back to the hotel. They cross the O'Connell Bridge (211). The bridge was named for Daniel O'Connell, also known as "The Liberator", an Irish political leader in the early nineteenth century until his death during the Great Famine (Geoghegan 104). As they cross the bridge O'Callaghan points out an old myth: "They say you never cross O'Connell Bridge without seeing a white horse" (211). The meaning of the bridge unfolds here together with the meaning of the statue. Crossing the liberator's bridge foreshadows Gabriel's epiphany, in which "The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward" (220). Here, "westward" navigates away from Britain and towards liberation.

Moreover, the impicature of a white horse conjures images of the first of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, symbolizing Death (Baynes 322). Two centuries ago, King William III and the white horse he went to war on symbolized death for many Irish Catholics (P. McDonald 72). Equally, the end of O'Connell's career and life were marred by death. The Great Famine was engineered by the British and cost over a million Irish lives (Whelan 8). By invoking O'Connell and the white horse, Joyce builds to a redemp-

tion solely for the traumatized, namely, liberation through the dead, which Gabriel will come to realize in his epiphany.

Once they arrive at the hotel, Gretta starts to cry and she tells Gabriel about a boy, Michael Fury, whom she had loved in her girlhood. And he had loved her in return, so much so that he died after waiting for her in the cold and rain (215-8). As Gretta cries herself to sleep, Gabriel contemplates the dead:

"The tears gathered more thickly in his eyes and in the partial darkness he imagined he saw the form of a young man standing under a dripping tree. Other forms were near. His soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead. He was conscious of, but could not apprehend, their wayward and flickering existence. His own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world: the solid world itself, which these dead had one time reared and lived in, was dissolving and dwindling" (220).

The dead are now as real to Gabriel as he is or as Gretta is. And in that, all the lives lost to war, genocide, rebellion, and uprising far outnumber those of the empire. In this liminal space between life and death, Joyce reaches forwards into the future: "Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. [...] and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves" (220). It is in the space of the dead that Joyce establishes a dialectic futurity. Here, the reference to the mutiny of the West foreshadows liberation on the horizon.

Rewriting the City

"The Dead" is the final story in Joyce's collection *Dubliners*. The collection starts with "The Sisters", which tells the story of a priest's death from a young boy's point of view. A cradle to coffin collection that, according to letters cited by David Rando, was to function as a mirror for Dubliners of the time, as Joyce wrote to his editor: "I seriously believe that you will retard the course of civilization in Ireland by preventing the Irish people from having one good look at themselves in my nicely polished looking-glass" (54). Even the title, 'Dubliners', opposed to preempting it with a determiner, could be read as the start of an address. What reflection will Dubliners then come to see of themselves after reading the closing lines of "The Dead"?

Joyce utilizes the space created in Conroy's epiphany by foregoing iterations of nationhood already known, such as those under colonialism or of the Gaelic revival, in favor of an open-ended future. At the time of

writing, Ireland was some twenty years removed from independence (Nolan 24), and Irish nationalism and the Gaelic revival were popular (R. McDonald 52). Considering this, allowing this dialectic process to continue is a hopeful act because it acts on possibility, as Rigney argues, because hope comes from an available prospect, a future-oriented gaze (370).

Joyce resists narrativizing this future; there is no crystallization, no flashforward. Again, the snow plays an important role in narrativizing "The Dead". By invoking the snow, Joyce leaves Dublin and all of Ireland illegible, a blank slate solely of use to its subjects. In the final passage, Gabriel is taken out of his impasse by the weather outside: "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" (220). In this scene Gabriel inverts his epiphany from the individual to the communal. It is not that his state of both being alive and sensing the realm of the dead has passed, more it has expanded to all of Ireland. The fact that Michael Furey is as real as he or Gretta lends all of the dead a new agency. They are as free to haunt Dublin as the living are to roam it.

Michel de Certeau considers those who roam the city. On the one hand, there are the controlling bodies. Governments, corporations, and city planners view the city as a legible entity. On the other, there are the city dwellers, who walk and subvert the map, rewriting the city (93). As David Spurr notes: "With its broad vistas, ordered arrangement, and masterful architecture, [Dublin] is the ideal site for the display and deployment of imperial authority" (23). Through the snow, Joyce can almost completely corrupt the celestial controlling eye. He rewrites it to a blank slate where even the likes of Wellington and O'Connell are capped by snow, leaving the city anew.

Memory Studies and Futurity

Within recent years there is an increasing interest in hope and futurity within memory studies and aim to extend the scope beyond the present (Rigney 371). As Rando points out: "By representing the ongoing process of hope and hunger within their historical conditions, Joyce's stories point forward to a wishful future, however undefined" (67). By foregoing the materialization of a future, Joyce returns the agency over Ireland's future back to its citizens.

Overwhelmingly *Dubliners* has been read by post-structuralists as a vignette of colonial paralysis affecting Dubliners (Rando 53). Here, "The Dead" is read as an attempt to conceive of a yet unknown future, one that rejects the backward veering stance of nationalism as much as it does colo-

nialism. As Rigney points out, memory studies are often equally enamored with the rearview (369). Rigney's assessment of the concerns facing memory studies could be used to describe the intersection between nationalism and colonialism as viewed by Joyce: "On one hand, the danger of seeing memory only as traumatic and hence the legacy of the past as only negative; on the other hand, the danger of 'falling back' into narratives of progress or into an escapist optimism or a paralyzing nostalgia" (370). This brings to mind the conflict in the city of "The Dead": the colonial city possesses its citizens through psychological oppression and shame.

This unknown and fragile future is conceived as hopeful by Rigney and neutral by Rando. Both cite Ernst Bloch on hope: "the still undischarged future of the past" (377). Additionally, Rando cites his view of hope as "open to possibilities not necessarily imaginable in advance" (53). In his epiphany Gabriel comes to see that the dead subvert and thereby envelop the empire, obscuring its rule and its long-held conflict (Bender 280). As he finds himself, at the end of the story, not yet in the realm of the dead but slowly turning to shadows, Gabriel represents a bridge between the known and the not-yet representable. As the snow falls, Gabriel expands beyond both iterations.

Conclusion

By examining the Dublin of "The Dead", this paper has aimed to provide insights into how a city is controlled by colonial rule. This paper has laid out that colonialism is a form of continual conflict. Moreover, its aim has been to broaden the understanding of types of conflict by highlighting the psychological reverberations of war, conflict, and memory in periods with little to no physical violence.

By situating the story within the broader contexts of literature studies and postcolonialism, I have argued that postcolonial literature can contain their traumatic histories and the complexities of memory. Thereby writers can rewrite the city and aid in shaping a new unknown future.

Due to the scope of this paper, I suggest the need for further research on this topic in the literature and memory studies field. For example, while this paper has focused on the concept of memory and hope as a way to navigate between nationalism and colonialism, it would be pertinent to explore other concepts that might contribute to the dialectic process of creating a new future, such as forgiveness, reconciliation, or resilience. These concepts have the potential to enrich our understanding of the process of creating such a future, particularly in societies that have experienced significant trauma and conflict.

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