

Nada Amin
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Joyce's *The Dead*

“A few light taps upon the pane made him turn to the window. It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark and central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther west, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. 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 all the dead.”

Joyce ends *The Dead* on the image of snow falling, a recurrent motif which grows to be symbolic.

Joyce describes what Gabriel sees and hears using phrases that are on his mind, from his earlier conversations. The phrase “Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland,” echoes Mary Janes’ earlier comment “I read this morning in the newspapers that the snow is general all over Ireland.” The dramatic idiom “their last end” appeared before in a conversation about monks: “Their coffin is to remind them of their last end”. The movement of the snow falling takes Gabriel far away from his hotel room but zooms into Michael Furey’s graveyard, revealing Gabriel’s preoccupations.

From the first mention of snow, Joyce teases the reader, by alluding to a possible symbolic meaning: “A light fringe of snow lay like a cape on the shoulders of his overcoat and like toecaps on the toes of his goloshes; and, as the buttons of his overcoat slipped with a squeaking noise through the snow-stiffened frieze, a cold, fragrant air from out-of-doors escaped from crevices and folds.” We feel a spirit escaping with the “cold, fragrant air from out-of-doors” (as in from out of this world?). Personally, “cape” also reminded me of Death, wearing a cape like in Ingmar Bergman’s movie *The Seventh Seal*.

Later, when mentally rehearsing and before starting his speech, Gabriel thinks of the snow outside. In his speech, Gabriel mentions the dead, who, and whose world, still live in the memory of the living. His wife’s later revelation shows him his mention was more than chatter. Before the last paragraph, Joyce writes, “the solid world itself, which these dead had one time reared and lived in, was dissolving and dwindling,” which conjures up the process of snow melting.

The snow descends like descends death, faintly, isolating everyone indiscriminately. As the living die, the dead die again their memory forgotten like snow melts.