



## JOYCE'S "THE DEAD" AND HUSTON'S CINEMATIC ADAPTATION: METHOD OF NARRATION

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### **Abstract:**

The method of narration is highly significant for audience reception. As artistic genres have different styles and qualities, adapting a piece of work from one genre to another affects the original story and its emotional impact. In this account, the adaptation of James Joyce's short story "The Dead" into a film changed the emotional intensity of it, due to the absence of an omniscient narrator in the film. It also affected the portrayal of the protagonist Gabriel and representation of relationships between the characters. The Irish director John Huston experimented in his adaptation of the story; he introduced new scenes and added an interior monologue to the end in an attempt to achieve the same effect as that of the original genre. This paper will attempt to study the differences between the two versions of James Joyce's "The Dead."

**Keywords:** James Joyce, "The Dead," Short story, Film, Method of narration.



## Introduction

Adaptation is "the recasting of a work in one medium to fit another, such as the recasting of novels and plays as film or television scripts" (Cuddon, 1999). It is common for novels to be adapted into films; it is not as common for short stories to be adapted into motion pictures, as they tend to distinguish short stories from novels, notably the intensity. James Joyce's short story "The Dead," part of his masterpiece short works collection, *Dubliners*, is one of great depth and complexity. The adaptation of this story was both a clever and faithful move, with which the renowned Irish director John Huston concluded his career. Again, he collaborated with his son, who wrote the script. He remained in synchrony with the original work, as the biggest challenge was to portray the story with its psychological implications, and its nature. The changes Huston made were few but necessary; in addition, with the new genre, he changed the narration method, which affected the intrinsic implications of the story, thus relying heavily on an omniscient narrator.

Huston implemented several compensations to deal with the absence of a narrator, as the protagonist forfeits the leading role in the story, which is a major drawback to the film. In the original text, the reader sees the world through the eyes of an omniscient narrator, so that after the arrival of the protagonist, Gabriel Conroy, the story is told from his point of view, thereby exposing his inner thoughts and feelings. When Gabriel receives Lily's bitter reply about men, after he asks about her impending marriage, he experiences feelings of awkwardness, as if "he had made a mistake" (Joyce, 1991). As an act of restitution for his mistake, he took some money out of his pocket and gave it to her. Her response created gloom in him, focused on the words of his speech, and his fear of not being understood: "He would fail with them just as he had failed with the girl in the pantry" (Joyce, 1991). In the film, the camera is the narrator, which did not show insight into Gabriel's character: it was mute and external. The camera did not capture his embarrassment after Lily's sharp retort. To the contrary, spectators embraced his reaction when he paid her, as a kind of appreciation for her services.



The psychological link between Gabriel's misunderstanding with Lily and his fear of repeating the same thing during his speech was also lost in the film. The omniscient narrator's description of Gabriel's thoughts are similar to a stream of consciousness technique. It is private, with the camera external and demanding work from the spectators to interpret his actions. Ideas elicit other ideas, like a mental chain, but Gabriel's thoughts are psychologically linked. When the gloom of what happened with Lily brings up an increased fear of failing, the camera demonstrates how the film similarly loses an element of coherence.

### **Main Body**

These insights into Gabriel's mind, with the help of the omniscient narrator, provides an understanding of his character. Gabriel's sensitivity towards himself and others are not clear in the film. When he dances with Miss Ivors, he seems cold and rigid. He does not appear to be moved by her behavior with him. However, in Joyce's text, the situation is far more complex. The omniscient narrator exposes Gabriel's cautiousness with her for the sake of their friendship: "They were friends of many years standing and their careers had been parallel, first at the University and then as teachers: he could not risk a grandiose phrase with her" (Joyce, 1991, 132). His nervousness is also illustrated through the description. "Gabriel glanced right and left nervously, and tried to keep his humor, which was causing a blush on his forehead" (Joyce, 1991, 132). Readers indulge in his emotional reaction, so his sudden outburst to Miss Ivors is understood, while questioning his declined invitation to visit Aran Isles, "I'm sick of my own country, sick of it!" (Joyce, 1991, 147). Gabriel retreats after this and sits beside Freddy's mother to calm himself, which is not clear in the film.

Gabriel is a character with low self-esteem, who questions everything, as he practices self-reproach. He is concerned about his response to Miss Ivors, sitting with Freddy's mother, listening to her.



"He questions his present and past, and is shown as aware of his surroundings." Rather than the aloof Gabriel in Huston's film, Joyce's story exposes the subjectivity of the character through manipulation of consciousness in the descriptive passage" (Corseuil, 2008, 9). The inability of the camera to portray the internal struggles in Gabriel's psyche, and also failing to expose much of his character, make it hard for the audience to sympathize with and understand him.

It is essential for the audience to understand Gabriel's internal struggles, as most of the story occurs in his mind. Missing this leads to a dimming of the lights and attention to his character. In the film, one could mistake Gretta as the protagonist herself, with Freddy appearing to be more important than Gabriel.

"The Dead" is an epiphanic story. Thus, the omniscient narrator paves the way for readers to see Gabriel's striking moment by providing insight to his character. "The character must have the potential for change, and this potential is explored throughout the short story, that there are antagonistic forces making him reevaluate and check his behavior" (Corseuil, 2008, 8). This is absent with a silent camera, however.

## Discussion

An important implication of the story, with the camera functioning as the narrator, misses historical information about the characters; this information would have provided insight into the relationships between characters. Bluestone (1968) explains "with the abandonment of language as its sole and primary element, the film necessarily leaves behind characteristic content of thought, which only language can approximate: tropes, dreams, memories, conceptual consciousness" (Corseuil, 2008, 8). In the film, the audience is not aware of the history of Gabriel and Gretta's marriage. They are also not aware of how Gabriel's mother rejected Gretta and called her "country cute." This information is significant in explaining how the characters reacted to each other. Gretta was actually the one who nursed Gabriel's mother through an illness, revealing her character and relationship with Gabriel's family.



Most of the history between Gabriel and Gretta is absent in the film, due to the absence of the omniscient narrator. As stated, John Huston and his son tried to compensate for this by introducing a new scene in the film – in which a new character, Mr. Grace, recites an Irish poem translated by Lady Gregory, "Broken Vows." The title is suggestive in itself, drawing the audience's attention to Gabriel and Gretta's marriage. It was also used to foreshadow the emotional distance which would take place between them in the end, after the discovery of Gretta's passionate lover who died for her and deeply touched her heart.

In discussing methods of narration between two different genres, it is enriching to relate what Frank Pilipp (1993) says about the matter:

Films are expected to elucidate a state of affairs through sight and sound; an outside narrator is considered inartistic or the film would use its soundtrack much the way literature uses assertive syntax. Thus, the specific difficulties in making a novel into film lie in the transformation of the richness of language into the expressiveness of pictures, especially the narrative perspective and the flexibility of the narrator into proper cinematography, as well as the specific tone verbal narratives can imply through intelligent camera work.

At the end of the film, John Huston and his son succeed in achieving an effect similar to that of the original text. They transform Gabriel's stream of consciousness to an interior monologue. Meljac (2009) describes this process:

Huston must resort to using Joyce's final words as part of an internal monologue delivered by Gabriel. The moments it takes Gabriel to recite these lines are occupied with images, illustrating subjects Gabriel mentions: the dark central plain, the snow falling in a churchyard, and the street outside of the hotel. Viewers are compelled not only to listen but to see, in addition to the request that they also feel the emotive force of the words and images.



It is clear that visually-tangible images are more powerful than words. With such a powerful combination of descriptive words and visual images, Huston achieves a vivid effect in the concluding scene.

### Conclusion

In summary, each literary genre has its own special effects and power, distinguishing it from others. In the case of James Joyce's "The Dead," the genre adds a great deal to its meaning and depth, allowing for a unique method of narration, or the omniscient narrator. In the adaptation of Joyce's story into a cinematic medium, Huston loses the omniscient narrator, on which a great portion of the story relies. However, as Meljac (2009) puts it, "while there are certainly poor cinematic versions of books, Huston's is not one of them."

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