



Gabriel's epiphany

James Joyce
Dubliners
(1914)
The Dead

The protagonists of the story are Gabriel Conroy and Gretta, his wife. The story opens with their going to the annual Christmas party given by Julia and Kate Morkan, Gabriel's aunts. There is eating, drinking and merrymaking at the party, during which Gabriel meets several people, among whom a nationalistic irritating young woman who accuses him of being a 'West Briton'. This exchange makes Gabriel unsure of himself and, from then on, the evening becomes a disaster for him. He gives a well-received speech, but he thinks it is a superficial triumph. Towards the end of the evening, Gretta hears a song which reminds her of a young man, Michael Furey, who died for his love to her when she was 17 years old.

After the party, Gabriel and his wife come back to their room in a hotel nearby. Gabriel is consumed with physical passion while his wife is far away from him, since she is thinking about that song and that young man. She then falls asleep and Gabriel watches her with affectionate pity.

She was fast asleep.

Gabriel, leaning on his elbow¹, looked for a few moments unresentfully on her tangled² hair and half-open mouth, listening to her deep-drawn breath³. So she had had that romance⁴ in her life: a man had died for her sake. It hardly pained him now to think how poor a part he, her husband, had played in her life. He watched her while she slept as though he and she had never lived together as man and wife. His curious eyes rested long upon her face and on her hair: and, as he thought of what she must have been then, in that time of her first girlish beauty, a strange friendly pity for her entered his soul. He did not like to say even to himself that her face was no longer beautiful but he knew that it was no longer the face for which Michael Furey had braved⁵ death.

Perhaps she had not told him all the story. His eyes moved to the chair over which she had thrown some of her clothes. A petticoat string dangled⁶ to the floor. One boot stood upright, its limp⁷ upper fallen down: the fellow of it lay upon its side. He wondered at his riot⁸ of emotions of an hour before. From what had it proceeded? From his aunt's supper, from his own foolish speech, from the wine and dancing, the merry-making⁹ when saying good-night in the hall, the pleasure of the walk along the river in the snow. Poor Aunt Julia! She, too, would soon be a shade with the shade of Patrick Morkan and his horse. He had caught that haggard¹⁰ look upon her face for a moment when she was singing *Arrayed for the Bridal*. Soon, perhaps, he would be sitting in the same drawing-room, dressed in black, his silk hat on his knees. The blinds would be drawn down¹¹ and Aunt Kate would be sitting beside him, crying and blowing her nose and telling him how Julia had died. He would cast about¹² in his mind for some words that might console her, and would find only lame¹³ and useless ones. Yes, yes: that would happen very soon.

The air of the room chilled¹⁴ his shoulders. He stretched himself cautiously along under the sheets and lay down beside his wife. One by one they were all becoming shades. Better pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dismally¹⁵ with age. He thought of how she who lay beside him had locked in her heart for so many years that image of her lover's eyes when he had told her that he did not wish to live.

Generous tears filled Gabriel's eyes. He had never felt like that himself towards any woman but he knew that such a feeling must be love. 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 dripping¹⁶ tree. Other forms were near. His soul had approached that region where dwell¹⁷ the vast hosts of the dead. He was conscious of, but could not apprehend, their wayward and flickering¹⁸ existence. His own identity was

1 elbow. Gomito.
2 tangled. Scarmigliati.
3 deep-drawn breath. Respiro profondo.
4 romance. Avventura.
5 braved. Sfidato.

6 A petticoat string dangled. Un laccio della sottoveste penzolava.
7 limp. Afflosciata.
8 riot. Tumulto.
9 merry-making. Lett.: festa; qui: gli invitati.
10 haggard. Stanco.

11 The blinds ... down. Gli scuri sarebbero stati abbassati.
12 He would cast about. Avrebbe cercato.
13 lame. Inefficaci, inadeguate.
14 chilled. Gelò.
15 wither dismally. Avvizzire in modo

terribile, tristemente.
16 dripping. Grondante di pioggia.
17 dwell. Dimorano.
18 wayward and flickering. Misteriosa e vacillante.



fading out into a grey impalpable world: the solid world itself which these dead had one time reared¹⁹ and lived in was dissolving and dwindling²⁰.

35 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 on²¹ his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen²² and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon²³ waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly 40 drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones²⁴, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns²⁵. His soul swooned²⁶ 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.

19 reared. Procreato.

20 dwindling. Svanendo.

21 to set out on. Di intraprendere.

22 Bog of Allen. Zona paludosa che si trova al centro dell'Irlanda.

23 Shannon. Il principale fiume

irlandese.

24 crooked crosses and headstones.

Croci piegate e lapidi.

25 thorns. Spine.

26 swooned. Svani.

VISUAL ANALYSIS

1 **READ** the text and identify its two parts. Then write a heading to each section.

2 **LOOK** at the visual analysis and write down what each highlight and colour represents.

room

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Can you explain them?

.....

What does Gabriel become aware of?

falling

How would you define the language?

3 **DISCUSS** the following questions in pairs.

1 What is the situation described?

2 Why does the whole scene seem to lose a precise temporal connotation?

3 What conflicts can be found in Gabriel's thoughts?

4 What has Gretta's recalling Michael Furey caused Gabriel to realise?

5 What does Gabriel become at the end? How does he perceive himself?

6 What is the main antithesis of this extract?

**4 COMPLETE** the summary of the text with the words from the box.overshadowing
passionate
passionlesspurification
falling snow
antithesissymbolism
reconciles
incommunicabilityoverloaded with
angel

This extract is a combination of realism and **(1)** Everything is described in detail, but also **(2)** symbols. The personal names are symbols, too. Gabriel, according to the Bible, is both the prince of fire and the **(3)** of death. As for Michael, he is an angel too, and Michael Furey will live in Gretta's memory forever, **(4)** the weak presence of her husband.

The most effective **(5)** is the widespread metaphorical pattern of life and death. Gabriel learns from the memory of a dead young man that a brief **(6)** life can be more meaningful than a long **(7)** one. The final image of the **(8)** symbolically **(9)** life and death. The snow may be a symbol of death, which covers the dead and the living indifferently, the symbol of hopeless solitude and **(10)** or of the isolation and alienation of the artist in Dublin and Ireland. At the same time, it may be the symbol of **(11)** and life, since it clears the world of all the negative images. As with all Joyce's endings, the reader can only guess what the morning after will bring to Gabriel.

> COMPETENCE: PRODUCING A WRITTEN TEXT ON A GIVEN SUBJECT**5 WRITE** a 10/12-line paragraph to explain the importance of epiphany in *Dubliners*.