

Reading Subversion in “The Dead”: On Julia Morkan, Freddy Malins, and Michael Furey

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Introduction

What is James Joyce's “The Dead” in *Dubliners* (1914) all about? What is happening in the story? It is true that on the surface “The Dead” is about how Gabriel Conroy accepts his wife's tragic old love story, but like other Joyce texts, it is actually a deep, subtle, and subversive story enriched by several appealing supporting characters. In this paper, I explore how subversive “The Dead” is by focusing on three figures marginal to the story: Julia Morkan, Freddy Malins, and Michael Furey.

One of three hostesses at a party, Julia Morkan, a humble older woman who had been the leading soprano at a church until very recently, sings wonderfully, exceeding everyone's expectations. Freddy Malins, a young man of about 40 years, always under the influence of alcohol, is considered troublesome by others, but he is, in fact, one of the most appealing characters: he is not only a great appreciator of music, but also a pure, innocent, and honest man who says what he really thinks. The third character is Michael Furey, Gretta Conroy's former boyfriend, a young man who tragically died at the age of 17 years many years ago. Although he is dead, Michael is an important figure in the story: he is the dead to whom the title refers¹. These three marginalised figures are impressive in their own way, and each plays a very important role in the story, especially in terms of subversion, i.e. subversion of power relations between the strong and the weak, or the powerful and the powerless. This paper examines how each of them does so.

I. Julia Morkan

Let me begin with Julia Morkan. As Margot Norris argues in her illuminating article, “Who Killed Julia Morkan?,” John Huston's film adaptation of “The Dead” fails to represent what the original text by Joyce tells us clearly: i.e. Julia Morkan has a great voice, and her singing at the party is extraordinary. Norris argues as follows:

The extent to which this deliberate suppression of the possibility that Julia produced a singing of extraordinary beauty, a musical triumph, is carried over into the male criticism of the text, can be seen most dramatically in what was perhaps

the most vexing of the deliberate textual misrepresentations in John Huston's film version of "The Dead." The film renders Julia's performance of *Arrayed for the Bridal* as pathetically dreadful and painfully embarrassing, though Huston seemed to find her pathos "sad." The film's representation deliberately violates and contradicts the clear and unequivocal direction of Joyce's text on how Julia's song is sung: "Her voice, strong and clear in tone, attacked with great spirit the runs which embellish the air and though she sang very rapidly she did not miss even the smallest of the grace notes" (D 193). (Norris 114–5)

Whether this suppression is "deliberate" is not very clear; however, undoubtedly, Huston's film violates and contradicts what Joyce's text clearly states. Here is the passage in the narrator's voice and Gabriel's interior monologue that includes Norris's quotation from "The Dead" in the passage above ("Her voice, strong and clear in tone . . . even the smallest of the grace notes" [D 193]):

Gabriel recognised the prelude. It was that of an old song of Aunt Julia's—*Arrayed for the Bridal*. Her voice, strong and clear in tone, attacked with great spirit the runs which embellish the air and though she sang very rapidly she did not miss even the smallest of the grace notes. To follow the voice, without looking at the singer's face, was to feel and share the excitement of swift and secure flight. Gabriel applauded loudly with all the others at the close of the song and loud applause was borne in from the invisible supper-table. It sounded so genuine that a little colour struggled into Aunt Julia's face as she bent to replace in the music-stand the old leather-bound song-book that had her initials on the cover. (D 193)

We can very well see not only how Gabriel admires Julia's beautiful voice, but also how all the others greatly appreciate her performance. This scene is even more interesting in its striking contrast to the previous scene of Mary Jane Morkan's piano playing. Mary Jane, the niece of Kate and Julia Morkan and the youngest hostess of the party, is a church organist and piano teacher. Despite her credentials, her performance is poorly received:

Gabriel could not listen while Mary Jane was playing her Academy piece, full of runs and difficult passages, to the hushed drawing-room. He liked music but the piece she was playing had no melody for him and he doubted whether it had any melody for the other listeners, though they had begged Mary Jane to play something. Four young men, who had come from the refreshment-room to stand in the doorway at the sound of the piano, had gone away quietly in couples after a few minutes. The only persons who seemed to follow the music were Mary Jane herself, her hands racing along the key-board or lifted from it at the pauses like those of a priestess in momentary imprecation, and Aunt Kate standing at her elbow to turn the pages. (D 186)

Neither Gabriel nor the rest of the audience can abide Mary Jane's piano playing. The difference between Julia's singing and Mary Jane's piano playing is clear: Julia's song is melodic and wonderful, whereas Mary Jane's piano playing possesses neither quality.

As we know, the story has one more important performer, Bartell D'Arcy, a young dashing tenor who is very popular in Dublin. According to Mary Jane, "All Dublin is raving about him [D'Arcy]" (D 184). Although many people at the party want D'Arcy to perform, he would not because "he had a dreadful cold and couldn't sing" (D 212). Just after the party, however, he sings a private performance of *The Lass of Aughrim* accompanied by Miss O'Callaghan at the piano, a performance that Gretta overhears from outside the room. Obviously, his singing is far from perfect:

The song seemed to be in the old Irish tonality and the singer [D'Arcy] seemed uncertain both of his words and of his voice. The voice, made plaintive by distance and by the singer's hoarseness, faintly illuminated the cadence of the air with words expressing grief:

O, the rain falls on my heavy locks
And the dew wets my skin
My babe lies cold . . . (D 211)

Examining the common threads of Julia's great and moving song, Mary Jane's unmoving piano performance, and Bartell D'Arcy's hoarse, uninspired singing, I argue that radical subversion is working in all three instances. Julia, an old soprano, is the best performer that night in contrast to the other two socially more powerful figures: Mary Jane, a young organist and piano teacher and "the main prop of the household" (D 175), and Bartell D'Arcy, a young male professional singer. I agree with Norris, who says ". . . as a genuine musical talent Julia is probably far superior to the celebrated Bartell d'Arcy (sic)" (Norris 115). It seems to me that Julia, who is in a marginal position, is one of the most powerful, most loved, and most praised figures in the story. If so, "The Dead" is a story in which marginalised people have power. In this sense, we can call this a story of subversion.

II. Freddy Malins

The next character to be considered is Freddy Malins. Whether Julia's performance is great is of considerable significance in another sense, one that has everything to do with Freddy Malins and his characterisation. Freddy's reaction to Julia's performance is expressed in the following lines:

Freddy Malins, who had listened with his head perched sideways to hear her better, was still applauding when everyone else had ceased and talking animatedly to his mother who nodded her head gravely and slowly in acquiescence. At last, when he

could clap no more, he stood up suddenly and hurried across the room to Aunt Julia whose hand he seized and held in both his hands, shaking it when words failed him or the catch in his voice proved too much for him.

—I was just telling my mother, he said, I never heard you sing so well, never. No, I never heard your voice so good as it is to-night. Now! Would you believe that now? That's the truth. Upon my word and honour that's the truth, I never heard your voice sound so fresh and so . . . so clear and fresh, never. (D 193–4)

Here, we can observe how enthusiastically Freddy praises Julia, but the meaning of his words differs in terms of whether Julia's performance is great. If Julia's singing is truly great, Freddy's words turn out to be “the honest truth” (D 194); if Julia's singing is not as great as he claims, his words are false, revealing him to be a troublesome drunkard who lies—or worse, a mean, sarcastic man who makes fun of an old woman. Julia's singing is certainly perfect as we have observed in the previous section (“Julia Morkan”), and therefore Freddy's praise for Julia can be considered true and genuine.

To understand Freddy further, we turn to another scene in which he insists that a black chieftain in a pantomime has one of the finest voices he has ever heard:

Freddy Malins said there was a negro chieftain singing in the second part of the Gaiety pantomime who had one of the finest tenor voices he had ever heard.

—Have you heard him? He asked Mr Bartell D'Arcy across the table.

—No, answered Mr Bartell D'Arcy carelessly.

—Because, Freddy Malines explained, now I'd be curious to hear your opinion of him. I think he has a grand voice.

—It takes Teddy to find out the really good things, said Mr Browne familiarly to the table.

—And why couldn't he have a voice too? asked Freddy Malins sharply. It is because he's only a black?

Nobody answered this question and Mary Jane led the table back to the legitimate opera. (D 199)

Freddy has a high opinion of the black tenor in a pantomime, but Bartell D'Arcy does not show any interest in Freddy's opinion, nor do the others. Freddy's strong words, “And why couldn't he have a voice too? . . . It is because he's only a black?,” must be to the point: his words strongly criticise racial discrimination among the people here. We can understand from his words that he is a pure and honest man who speaks what he really thinks without being influenced by the majority's opinion or its reaction.

The same could be said about his praise for Julia's singing. He appreciates Julia's performance more than anyone else, praises her enthusiastically by giving his true opinion, and his warm and passionate words for Julia are pure and genuine. We can thus see him

as a pure and innocent person who speaks "the honest truth" (D 194). Although he is considered to be troublesome and taken lightly by the others, Freddy seems to be another figure who is most valued and loved like Julia in the story.

Subversion can thus be understood in terms of Freddy who is considered a troublesome drunkard, but is also the one who tells the truth in defiance of the majority's opinion—and this is how the story values and loves him.

III. Michael Furey

Finally, I focus on Michael Furey. Michael's marginality is clear in two senses: one is that he has been dead for a long time, and the other is that he has been kept secret from both Gabriel and the reader until the last several pages. The binary opposition between Gabriel and Michael is apparent: Gabriel, Gretta's husband, is alive, whereas Michael, Gretta's former boyfriend, is dead.

I argue that Michael's marginality is to be subverted is clear from the story's title, "The Dead." As it indicates, this is a story about "the dead," and the most important dead figure among all is none other than Michael, who died long ago, but has been kept secretly and preciousy at the bottom of Gretta's heart. Thus, this rather idiosyncratic title faintly and delicately predicts from the very beginning that this is a story of subversion—subversion of the hierarchy of the living and the dead.

I explain how subversion occurs in terms of Michael. In short, Michael is a more important figure than Gabriel for Gretta, at least on the night described in the story. We see this from the scene of Gabriel's questioning Gretta:

- What was he [Michael]? asked Gabriel, still ironically.
- He was in the gasworks, she [Gretta] said.

Gabriel felt humiliated by the failure of his irony and by the evocation of this figure from the dead, a boy in the gasworks. While he had been full of memories of their secret life together, full of tenderness and joy and desire, she had been comparing him in her mind with another. A shameful consciousness of his own person assailed him. (D 221)

Gabriel is captured by a sense of shame because Gretta must have been comparing him with Michael. Gretta soon makes a problematic confession:

- I suppose you were in love with this Michael Furey, Gretta, he [Gabriel] said.
- I was great with him at that time, she [Gretta] said.
- Her voice was veiled and sad. Gabriel, feeling now how vain it would be to try to lead her whither he had purposed, caressed one of her hands and said, also sadly:
- And what did he die of so young, Gretta? Consumption, was it?
- I think he died for me, she answered.

A vague terror seized Gabriel at this answer as if, at that hour when he had hoped to triumph, some impalpable and vindictive being was coming against him, gathering forces against him in its vague world. (D 221–2)

“I think he died for me”—Gretta's words deal a heavy blow to Gabriel. Her words here clearly reveal Michael's passionate and even fatal love for Gretta and her understanding of it. It is not very difficult for us to understand Gabriel's “terror” at possibly being defeated by his rival Michael in the romantic relationship with Gretta. After the scene of Gretta's confession, Gabriel's feeling is revealed in his interior monologue: “So she had had that romance 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” (D 223). Although he says to himself “It hardly pained him now,” it must be very sad and painful for Gabriel to understand his own position in his wife's mind. Thus, subversion is apparent in terms of Michael, too: Michael, rather than Gabriel, is the winner of Gretta's love at least on the night in the story.

Now, I come to a final observation with regard to Michael. As any careful reader might notice, although Michael is literally “dead,” his presence can be well felt, especially towards the end of the story. Motohiro Kojima argues in *Exploring Joyce* that the dead Michael not only exists in Gretta's sweet memory, but, in fact, also appears that night as a ghost to his former love far from his grave in Galway (Kojima 7). According to Kojima, Michael comes to see Gretta in the forms of the sick Bartell D'Arcy and of “a ghostly light from the street lamp” (D 217; Kojima 6–40). I agree with Kojima, believing that, although faintly and temporarily, Michael is present in this world that night. This is the day when Michael resurrects from the dead all the way from the other world, and perhaps Gretta feels and even sees him clearly. As Kojima observes, it is quite possible that Joyce intended the passionate former couple to have a secret date without letting Gabriel or even the reader know (Kojima 37). If so, the day of the story is very special and extraordinary: it is the day of Michael's resurrection from the dead.

Conclusion

We have seen how Julia, Freddy, and Michael in marginal positions are valued and cherished warmly in the story: Julia, an old, retired soprano, is the best performer that night; Freddy, a drunkard, tells “the honest truth” against the majority's opinions; and Michael, the dead, is successful in love. Once we understand this, it is easy for us to see how radical subversion is at work. From this perspective “The Dead” is a radically and miraculously subversive story that undermines our belief in conventional hierarchy—the hierarchy of men and women, of the young and the old, of the professional and the retired, of the decent and the troublesome, and above all, of the living and the dead.

Notes

- * This paper was originally prepared for the 6th International James Joyce Conference: "Glocal Joyce" hosted by James Joyce Society of Korea and held at Kangnam University on June 6, 2015. Unfortunately, I could not attend this conference. Special thanks go to Dr. Justin Hee-Whan Yun, then President of the James Joyce Society of Korea, Dr. Eunkyung Chun, and Dr. Seunghee Sone, who supported me wonderfully despite my cancellation.
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- 1 Who exactly is (or are) "the dead" to whom the title of the story refer(s) is not an easy or a simple question; rather, it is an essential question for any serious reader of "The Dead." Regarding this matter, Dr. Vincent Broderick suggested that I read Nicolás Brando's commentary. Brando writes: "The great question mark that Joyce's 'The Dead' creates is precisely who is this or who are these 'dead' mentioned in the title. There is a lot of ambiguity in this noun because its singular and plural form are exactly the same, so Joyce could be alluding to one, two, three, or a thousand dead and there would be no grammatical way of knowing how many are alluded in the title. / The easiest way to go would be to state that 'the dead' is none other than the 'main dead' of the story: Michael Furey, Gretta's young and innocent dead lover. But it would be too easy and, partially knowing Joyce, one should know that he usually puts easy solutions to misguide the reader from the real meaning of what he is trying to say." While I agree with Brando's opinion of Joyce's strategic ambiguity, I want here to read this primarily as a story of one dead man, Michael. In any case, most readers would agree that Michael is the most important "dead" in the story.

References

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