

## **“JOHN HUSTON’S ADAPTATION OF JAMES JOYCE’S ‘THE DEAD’: THE INTERRELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DESCRIPTION AND FOCALIZATION”**

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John Huston’s *The Dead*, produced in 1987, was based on James Joyce’s homonymous short-story. Compared to *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, *Dubliners*, the collection of short-stories in which “The Dead” is included, can be seen within a more realistic literary tradition since the short-stories do not present the radical formal and linguistic innovations which characterize Joyce’s later works. In spite of its realist descriptions, however, “The Dead” already reveals Joyce’s use of certain modernist narrative devices, such as the thorough exploration of the protagonist’s consciousness, the inclusion of nonlinear time at certain points of the short-story, and the use of an elaborated stream-of-consciousness in Gabriel’s monologue. Joyce’s use of a subjective tone, through Gabriel’s focalization, allows the reader to comprehend the fictional universe without the obtrusive voice of the narrator. In the exploration of the subjectivity of the protagonist, the short story presents a unity of space and time since most of the detailed descriptions are integrated with Gabriel’s acquiring consciousness of his life and affections. In this way, the story achieves a rapid narrative pace since Gabriel’s consciousness, which is the recipient for changes and expectancies, integrates the descriptive sequences and the unfolding of narrative action. The description of the place, the

disclosure of the relationships, and the epiphanic moment are integrated through Gabriel's focalization of the fictional world.

Despite the beautiful and poetic imagery of John Huston's film, his adaptation of Joyce's short-story presents certain narrative choices that effect not only the narrative pace of the film but also the development of the protagonist's subjectivity. Unlike the short-story, the film presents a slow pace that can be attributed to the lack of focalization of the descriptive passages by a given character, thus creating the effect of rupture between narrative development and description—as if the descriptions were “frozen” in time. The different narrative paces in Joyce's and Huston's narratives can be analyzed through their different ways of exploring and integrating narrative concepts such as description and focalization.

In Eisenstein's discussion of Charles Dickens' influence on D. W. Griffith's narrative techniques, he calls attention to the relationship between Griffith's parallel montages and Dickens's descriptions. The descriptions allow the reader to perceive the changing time within the fictional world, as in a process of transformation rather than as a process in which time is frozen. Dickens's descriptions present a displacement of order or linearity for the introduction of new elements that are recollected by the narrator (Eisenstein 211). According to different theorists “description introduces into the narrative time another time, a cosmic suspense which is not the time of mimesis or reproduction” (Beaujour 42). If narrative implies change, development, or metamorphoses, description is generally seen as static or as a process of freezing or suspending time. However, as Eisenstein's analysis of Dickens suggests, description can also be seen in relation to narrative change. As Meir Sternberg has pointed out, the action that takes place in time and the description that takes place in space are integrated since one's act of reconstructing the narrative events implies the reconstruction of the space in which the events take place. Thus, the elements that constitute space give the clues to the

development of the event in time, making it problematic, if not impossible, to divorce narrative and description (Sternberg 72).

The integration of space and time, or description and narrative action, is one of the main elements that makes Joyce's "The Dead" achieve a rapid narrative pace. The descriptions give the clues to the development of the story itself since they are not detached from the development of the action but are closely associated with the development of the characters. In the first scene, the description of the Morkan's house already establishes the contrasting tone between happiness and apprehension that will pervade the story. The three sisters are first shown on the stairs "laughing, fussing, and walking" (Joyce 175). The tone of festiveness is evinced by the description of the door-bell sound, the arrival of people, and the music coming from the piano. However, there is also an element of uncertainty since the sisters are too concerned with the delaying of Gabriel and the arrival of the always drunken Freddy Malins. In this context, the description of the Morkan's house and their behavior sets the antagonistic mood for the party which is both happy and tense. This initial description of the place is fundamental since it invites the reader to unravel the new antagonistic situations that will take place along the story.

Similarly to the stairs sequence, the first description of the three sisters' past cannot be seen as a static moment within the development of the narrative. On the contrary, the information that is given not only helps to trigger the reader's interest in the characters' lives, but also makes possible an understanding of their functioning within that society—their individual desires or needs were always obliterated for the sake of the family. The two sisters, Kate and Julia, who did not marry, looked after their orphaned niece, Mary Jane. The long initial description of their earlier lives is not directly related to the development of the story, but it gives the clues to understand certain moral and familial ethics. The sisters are afraid of Freddy Malins because of the scandals he may provoke; their function throughout the development of the narrative is to avoid

inconveniences such as the political or religious disagreements that could erupt among the members of the party. In summary, they follow codes of behavior that can be related to one who sacrifices for the well being of others. Their orderly and aesthetic sense, which is related to their carefulness about the conversations and the organization of the party, permeates the narration. In this context, the description provides guidelines for the development of the narrative in a unified way: the behavior of the sisters, which is explained by the descriptions, gives the action a broader frame in which psychological elements also play a part.

Unlike the short story, the film lacks descriptive flashbacks and is more attuned to fragmented descriptions among different characters. These descriptions are detached from the development of the story. The two descriptive sequences of the facade of the house, in a long shot, in the beginning and in the middle of the narrative, function as a form of interlude since they do not offer any comment on the story itself and are detached from the perspective of an individual character. Such a static description of the house may be seen as an embellishment of the photography but the break that it causes in the development of the narrative is obvious since it is detached from the perspective of the characters. In this way, the descriptions freeze narrative time, thus, showing the disintegration between the space described and the unfolding of narrative time. Although Henderson and Chatman have both argued for the advance of the narrative even in single descriptive shots (Burgoyne 119), description is a problematic category when analyzed in relation to the unfolding of the narrative in film. A descriptive sequence which is detached from a character's perspective will be immediately associated with the camera, thus, creating a sense that time stands still in the story while discourse-time is developing continually. In this way, the audience perceives that "the narrative has come to a point of stand still" (Burgoyne 119), as if space were disconnected from the events taking place within the fictional world. If the descriptions in Joyce's narrative always lead to Gabriel's

focalization, in Huston's film the descriptions are disconnected from the protagonist's perspective, thus, creating a sense of rupture between narrative action and description or time and space.

The descriptive pause which takes place during Julia's performance is also a static moment within the narrative development of the film since the camera-eye is an intrusive element in the world or the characters. The camera-eye, in this case, functions as a narrator who offers a view that is external to the vision and the perspective of the characters (Chatman 221). The camera shows the pictures and objects that are part of Julia's past but the description in itself does not add to the development of the narrative since it is more lyrical than functional. The images are beautiful in themselves but they do not become associated with a character's perspective. In this context, it is possible to establish an opposition between the descriptive sequences in the movie and in the short-story since the latter helps one's understanding of the development of the narrative whereas the former, by creating a pause in the story-time, detaches the audience from the story-world.

As previously suggested, one of the possible ways of understanding these different descriptions is through the presence of a character focalizer in the short-story and its absence in the movie. According to Burgoyne, focalizer can be defined as the agency through whom the events are conveyed, on both a perceptual and a psychological level. Filter, a similar term to focalizer, was coined by Seymour Chatman, in order to better convey the psychological and emotional narrative information flowing through a character (Burgoyne 94). In this sense, filter is for Chatman a term that expresses more thoroughly the psychological facet involved in the process of focalization (Chatman 144). In this article, the term focalizer will be used to convey both aspects: the psychological and the visual facets of focalization. The focalizer is not only the character who sees but also the character who feels. The point that is clarified by the role of the focalizer is that even in descriptive passages there is a filter whose

point of view does not necessarily coincide with the point of view of the narrator.

In descriptive sequences the perspective from which space is perceived can also help the reader understand the subjectivity of the character from whose perspective that space is shown. In this case, even within an impersonal narrative there is a character who feels, and the reader understands events and space through the subjectivity and feeling of this character. This seems to be the case of Joyce's impersonal narrator's description of the three sisters. It is their feelings, preferences, and perspective that is rendered to the readers through the indirect voice of the narrator. They are described as hard workers "who all did their share", whose only luxury was that of eating well, and who had a modest life (Joyce 176). By contrast, Huston's camera-eye does not present this human dimension of the characters. Their beliefs or feelings are not explored when the camera intrudes the privacy of Julia's rooms to show her belongings. Moreover, the description, which is devoid of a filter or subjectivity, freezes the story-time to emphasize the presence of the camera as a narrator.

Another example of the separation between description and focalization in the film is given when Gabriel first arrives at the Morkan's house and is apprehended by Lily's outburst. The film does not indicate that Gabriel feels embarrassed by Lily's sudden outburst against men's attitudes towards marriage; quite the opposite, he is only shown in his insistence in giving her a tip for her services. By contrast, in the short-story, the narrator describes Gabriel's feeling of uneasiness. As the narrator says, "Gabriel colored as if he felt he had made a mistake..." (Joyce 178). In this passage, the description allows the narrator to expose to the reader Gabriel's feeling and sensibility toward Lily. Within the context of the short-story, his impulse to give her a tip can be interpreted as a result of his inability to handle the situation. Therefore, what is read as aloofness in the movie can be construed as uneasiness in the short-story.

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In fact, throughout the film, in the scenes in which Gabriel functions as a filter, he is not shown as a sympathetic character. He is an aloof figure who is only concerned with his own speech, as he is shown as being completely insensible to the characters surrounding him. There is basically no integration between Gabriel and other characters, as the camera is constantly showing him in his attempt to glance at his speech. Even during his conversation with the Irish nationalist, Miss Ivors, when she questions his rejecting of travelling in his own country, the camera, as a systematic narrator, does not depict any kind of uneasiness in Gabriel's behavior. He only seems to dislike Ivor's behavior but he does not question his own feelings nor does he seem affected by her words. By contrast, in the short-story his embarrassment is shown by the narrator's description of his gestures: "...Gabriel glanced right and left nervously and tried to keep his good humour under the ordeal which was making a blush invade his forehead" (Joyce 190). In another passage it is Gabriel's questioning of his own reaction that is evinced: "Of course the girl or woman, or whatever she was, was an enthusiast but there was a time for all things. Perhaps he ought not to have answered her like that. But she had no right to call him a West Briton..." (191). While in the short-story Gabriel is the recipient for the events that happen around him, being slowly effected by them, in the movie the character is presented as insensible, detached from his surroundings. Indeed, in the movie, Gabriel's first gesture after Miss Ivor's words "West Briton" is to run to the window and sneak another glance at his speech as if Miss Ivor's reproach had no affect on him.

In the short-story, the reconstruction of Gabriel's feelings and sensations is achieved by descriptive passages that expose, step by step, the Character's subjectivity. Therefore, the integration of Gabriel's focalization and the descriptions function as clues for the reader to fill in the gaps created within the story. If "The Dead" revolves around the processes of Gabriel's self-discovery (indicated by the final indirect stream-of-consciousness provided by his

consciousness), it is absolutely necessary for the narrative to give the indices that will allow Gabriel to rediscover himself. The character must have the potential for a change, and this potential is explored throughout the short-story in his growing awareness that there are antagonistic forces making him reevaluate and check his behavior. Gabriel's sensibility is hardly explored in the movie, except for the final epiphanic moment. But, by the end of the film, the disintegration between Gabriel's epiphany and his previous detachment makes it quite difficult for the audience to establish empathy with the main character; the final epiphanic moment is, thus, displaced from Gabriel's previous development within the story.

Such displacement can also be explained by the multiplicity of filters presented throughout the movie. While the short-story focuses on Gabriel's perspective and feelings, the movie presents multiple focalizers and filters. In the movie, characters like Mr. D'Arcy, Miss Ivors, and Freddy Malins are presented as character-focalizers whereas Gabriel is shown looking at his copied speech. Freddy is, in fact, portrayed as a more sympathetic figure than Gabriel since the former's feelings and reactions are exposed to the audience while Gabriel lacks emotional responses. The camera explores Freddy's disagreements with Mr. Browne, his questioning of the validity of disguised prejudices against blacks, thus making him a likable character—one who has much more potential for development than the aloof Gabriel. Moreover, throughout the descriptive sequences the impersonal camera-eye, which competes within the different characters' point-of-view shots, presents an impersonal and detached view of the story. This quality of Huston's narrative is best illustrated in the description of Julia's room and of the facade of the house, as previously discussed. In this context, Gabriel's final epiphanic moment is decontextualized since his psychological potentials for his final awareness were not fully explored.

The manipulation of time, shown through Gabriel's inner thoughts and flashbacks, is another element that makes the narrative



of the short-story more integrated than the film's narrative. Indeed, the manipulation of a character's perspective is a characteristic element of the modernist novel. The external world assumes a certain importance as long as the individual is conscious of it. Within the context of the modernist novels, nineteenth century linear and objective representations of the world were being replaced by non-linear and subjective narratives in which time and space could only make sense through the consciousness of the character. This generalization can be applied to Virginia Woolf's and James Joyce's seminal modernist representations, and it is also the case in "The Dead". Throughout the narrative, Gabriel reflects upon his past in an incomplete and unformed way since he relocates the past within his present through the reminiscences that are brought to mind by details in the Misses Morkan's annual dance:

Gabriel's eyes, irritated by the floor...wandered to the wall above the piano. A picture of the balcony scene of Romeo and Juliet hung there...which Aunt Julia had worked in red, blue, and brown wools when she was a girl...for one year his mother had worked for him as a birthday present a waistcoat of purple tabinet, with little foxes' heads upon it...It was strange that his mother had had no musical talent. (187)

In this description Gabriel's mind wanders from present time objects to images of his past life and back to his present again in a way that his thoughts are presented as unformed. However, the description becomes meaningful to the development of the narrative since it give us the clues to understand the protagonist as a sophisticated character, capable of changing. He is questioning his present and past, and he is shown as being aware of his surroundings. Rather than the aloof Gabriel of Huston's film, Joyce's story exposes the subjectivity of the character through the manipulation of Gabriel's consciousness within the descriptive passage.

Henry Bergson's theories of memory as flux in time were appropriated by the modernist novelists, specifically in their representations of the character's mind. As Bergson says,

Memory is not a faculty of putting away recollections in a drawer, or of inscribing them in a register....In reality, the past is preserved by itself....It follows us at every instant; all that we have felt, thought and willed from our earliest infancy is there, leaning over the present which is about to join it.  
(Bergson 60-1)

The evolving of time within the consciousness of a person seems to be the process which exposes the character Gabriel as a complex one. In his mind, as the party develops, concepts and ideas are shown as incoherent; feelings, emotions and space are in a process of being interpreted but without definitive answers. Within this process of self-doubt and self-discovery the reader becomes involved by the development of the narrative.

In the short-story, although Gabriel's final epiphanic moment is an element of surprise, it is still integrated with the character's development since the narrative projects on Gabriel all the possibilities for a change. The film, due to its inconsistent use of Gabriel as a focalizer, does not explore the full potential of the character. Moreover, the maneuvering of Gabriel's consciousness throughout the descriptive passages of the short-story allows the reader to immerse in the story itself, without making a distinction between story-time and narrative-time. In the film such immersion is rather difficult since the descriptive passages freeze story-time while narrative time is evolving.

In the film, the final stream-of-consciousness would be better integrated with the rest of the narrative if Gabriel's subjectivity were the dominant focalizer of the events. In this way, different elements of the narrative such as temporality, focalization and stream-of-consciousness would be integrated by Gabriel's

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subjectivity. In Joyce's "The Dead" temporality and descriptions are filtered through Gabriel's mind, integrating his thoughts, feelings, and perspective with his final moment of sudden realization. By contrast, in the film, the lack of a consistent focalizer creates a process of fragmentation between description and narrative development, thus affecting not only the pace of the narrative but also jeopardizing the viewer's engagement with Gabriel's final awareness. Furthermore, in the short-story, there is a rapid narrative pace which is partially due to the integration of descriptions and narrative development, all filtered through Gabriel's consciousness. In the film a disintegrated narrative allows his consciousness to "explode" just in the end, as a mind divorced from the rest of the film. This divorce, as I have attempted to indicate, is problematic in a number of ways: it jeopardizes audience's understanding of the narrative development since it disrupts narrative integration and slows down narrative pace, freezing time whenever descriptive sequences are being shown to the audience. Huston's erasing of a dominant focalizer and his separation of story-time and narrative-time go against the potentials of film as a medium, fully capable of expressing psychological nuance and of integrating the various elements in any narrative.

The problems in Huston's adaptation of Joyce's story seem to be, in fact, more related to Huston's inconsistent exploration of two major filmic narrative devices: focalization and integration of narrative development throughout the descriptive sequences. In general, camera-eye tends to be unobtrusive, letting the characters carry on the narrative. The film's lack of a focalizer and its consistent freezing of story-time to enhance the descriptive sequences lead to the conclusion that Huston's film is less keen on the potentials of its own medium to narrate a story than on its approximation to a poetic piece, in which images stand still, but narrative integration is hardly achieved and Gabriel's subjectivity is problematically rendered.

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