Irish Identity In The Short Story The Dead By James Joyce

In the late 12th century Ireland was conquered by Britain; the invasion was called the Norman Conquest and was undertaken by the Anglo-Normans which was the ruling class in England. Ireland, like many other nations that were taken over by imperialists often gets compared to other nations Britain occupied. Ireland has identified with the Catholic church for centuries which is why when tried to force a national church of Ireland it caused the “Irish to cling to their religious beliefs and practices not only because of their faith but also because it became a symbol of their identity and a means of political resistance to imperial policy” (Timothy 2). This example represents how the Irish found a positive outlet to stay true to their identity however, this was not always the case. In the short story “The Dead” by James Joyce, Joyce depicts Gabriel Conroy, wrestling with his thoughts and environment to define his identity, he is insecure with himself and continues to measure himself in the eyes of others. Conroy’s insecurities stem from the deep ties he has within. Joyce outlines these ties with subtle symbols and criticism from other characters. “The Dead” highlights the hurdles Ireland and citizens of the country are still overcoming in efforts to regain their nationalism and how different generations are impacted by neocolonialism.

Joyce reveals the insecurities of Irish characters correlating to the colonization under Britain's behalf. At the beginning of the story, Conroy, a professor, and writer is queried as to why he goes on vacation to cycle in other countries, particularly France, Belgium, and Germany. Miss Ivor’s, an Irish nationalist asks, “Why do you go to France and Belgium, instead of visiting your own land?” Gabriel is hesitant to answer, but claims it is to keep in touch with the languages. Miss Ivor’s rebuttal of Gabriel’s motivation unsettled Gabriel as if he should focus on his language, Gaelic, to which he states that “Irish is not my language”. Gabriel’s dismissal shows his disconnect with his language, which is an essential element in any culture. In 1700 “English had become the language of administration, commerce, education, and the literate classes” (Hepburn 200). Gabriel's abandonment of his heritage is likely due to the more formal use of the English language that occurred when Britain took rule, which has caused a significant drift from the use of the native language, Gaelic. Gabriel a man who seems to take joy in his appearance is criticized for his choice of shoes, “Goloshes!” said Mrs. Conroy. Goloshes are to be put on over your boots, Gabriel “laughs nervously” and explains that everyone on the “continent” wears them. This is another instance when Gabriel presents himself as a certain persona, but is chastised for doing so. The battle Conroy faces between the person he wants to be and what others push on him is what causes his self-identity struggle.

On many occasions, Miss Ivor repeatedly tests Gabriel’s allegiance to Ireland and embarrasses him while doing so. When discussing his writing for The Daily Express, Miss Ivor calls Gabriel a “West Briton”, an offensive term used for an Irish person who is recognized as yearning to be a part of society. Gabriel appeared to be in shock from Miss Ivor’s remark; however, Ivor appears to be joking and uses humor about Gabriel’s insecurity and shame to highlight his lack of Irish identity. It is fair to say that Miss Ivor constantly attacks Gabriel’s image of himself, implying that it may be more noticeable to others than it is Gabriel; that he associates more with community and doesn’t even realize his lack of identity to his Irish culture. Miss Ivor’s disposition can serve as Conroy's conflict with the Irish nationality. This was not the only time Miss Ivor’s accused Gabriel of being a “West Briton”. Earlier on in attempts to avoid

conversation with Miss Ivor, after claiming to be “sick” of his country without a reason as to why, Gabriel eventually is faced with Miss Ivor. Nonverbal communication is used between the two till Miss Ivor whispers “West Briton” in his ear. This is an additional example of Conroy’s inability to accept his heritage which is the reason he remains disconnected with his culture and does not allow him to easily relate to and connect with the people around him.

Britain’s historical education can also be seen as taking priority over Ireland’s when “a picture of the two murdered princes in the Tower” were highlighted in history books. Patrick Mccarthy speaks to how this small rendering “demonstrates the impact of an educational system that taught, but not Irish history”. The educational system that had enforced in Ireland has created a self-conscious psychological shame for many citizens regarding their identity, and we can see this is true in Gabriel’s position. The text also acknowledges military heroes such as a statue of “King Billy” and “Wellington”. When describing Wellington, Joyce uses elegant adjectives and nouns like “bright” and “gleaming”.These statues already have a role of prominence, without the use of heightened positive characterization, only furthermore creating a picture that Britain is superior to Ireland - Dubliners may not even realize how great of an influence these statues have to their subconscious thoughts. Additionally, the use of these bold statues and the shortage of Irish heroic symbols can be seen as a loss of nationalism and unwittingly leave an impression, as it did with Gabriel. The passionate tone Gabriel uses as he tells a story of King Billy and the admiration of Billy’s representation shows just how Gabriel is charmed with order and lack of Irishness as he cherishes the wins of nations that are not his own. When talking about the Wellington Monument, Gabriel expresses “how much more pleasant it would be there than at the supper-table”, implying that a dinner table would not serve the monument justice, a monument that was “built to commemorate the victories of Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington” (Wellington Monument) but other symbols or Irishness are fine at the house?

Gabriel is conscious of his higher level of education and views himself as superior in comparison to the other guests attending the party. We see this when the narrator tells the readers that Gabriel “was undecided about the lines from Robert Browning, for he feared they would be above the heads of his hearers. Some quotations that they would recognize from Shakespeare or from the Melodies would be better”. This action is insulting to assume that the others would not be as well known or comprehended. It also depicts Gabriel’s honest belief of the people with whom he is socializing with and are considered his own in terms of being categorized as Irish citizens. This only further showcases Gabriel’s internal separation among himself and the others. At the beginning of the story, Gabriel is caught in an embarrassing moment when discussing a hypothetical marriage with Lily, the housekeeper. Lily scoffs at this notion and to fix the awkward encounter, Gabriel offers her a coin to make up for this disastrous conversation. Gabriel uses the Christmas holiday as an acceptable reason for Lily to take the coin, however, the offer of a coin would be considered impolite to most individuals, but is acceptable for an Irish house worker. This yet again speaks to how Gabriel views his people and how they deserve to be treated and what they are willing to accept.

Geography and history are not the only areas that left many Irish ashamed or embarrassed about, as a result of oppression. Evidence of Ireland’s inferiority complex in comparison to other nations in Europe can be seen when Mr. Bartell D'Arcy and Mr. Browne discuss the musical talent in Ireland and how it is not the same as it used to be. They believe that this is part of the reason why there are no longer performances and shows running. Mr. Bartell D’Arcy, who is a singer himself, tries to give Dubliners some faith and believe that there is a chance that there are some good singers out there, though, when questioned “where are they?” from Mr.

Browne, Mr. Bartell D'Arcy explains they're "in London, Paris, Milan". This commentary serves as an insult to the Irish community implying that talent is scarce and that Dublin is no longer the location where entertainment takes place because it is not worthy of it or talent would rather go to more popular and larger cities such as London, as opposed to gaining popularity in Ireland. Freddy Malins brings up a controversial topic when discussing the talented "Negro chieftain" and questions the others if the reason he could not possibly be gifted is because he is black. No one entertains Malin's opinion and the topic is changed, but Joyce adds this in to bring attention to the discrimination that the black community faces similar to difficulties the Irish musicians go through.

Ireland has always been a nation with a strong sense of nationality, a uniform religion, and a profound cultural identity. The country's "territorial unity and integrity have been the key components of nationalism that has been profoundly influenced by the power and proximity of Britain" (Evans 358). Ireland's relationship with the Catholic church has shown Catholicism as a critical component and connection to Irishness and nationalism (Evans 360). Although religion provides a large part to the Irish identity, it has not always been available to center the nation, for example when "religion has historically been suppressed, it can act as a substantial contributor to an imagined community" (Evans 359). Meaning that the Catholic church at a time was not necessarily the number one choice for seeking a community, if individuals were unable to practice freely. Nonetheless, some people believe the repression of the Catholic religion ultimately "emerged a stronger and more connected national identity because of imperialism and the Irish effort to resist it" (Timothy 3). In the story, Mary Jane was explaining how the Monastery worked and Mr. Browne frankly spoke on how he wished "we had an institution like that in our Church". This assertion indicates that there is more than one problem wrong with the church, which furthermore suggests the problem characters in "The Dead" have with a symbolic representation of Irish identity.

The last page of the story puts together a picture of how bland and unattractive the land looks, Gabriel explains how the snow was "falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves". Joyce suggests that the snow is a metaphor for how Gabriel is feeling toward others. His numbness is similar to what snow does to a person, hinting Gabriel would prefer to be dead than pretend to be living his best life in a world where he constantly battles his inner soul. Joyce not only depicts snow falling outside of Gabriel's window, but all over the land which can be made to compare that all of Ireland is without feeling. Thus, what is one, if one does not have feelings? One is adrift. Furthermore, declaring how Gabriel and Ireland have a loss of self. Relating to history there was a "wide agricultural depression of the late 1870s, and Ireland's consecutive crop failures in 1878 and 1879" (Kane 245). It should also be made clear that winter is the season of the dead, which just so happens to be the title of the story. Whether the author is also indicating that the land is dull because of the agricultural depression, this is not the first time Gabriel implies Ireland's land is not good enough for him. Gabriel's arrogance can be seen as well when he discusses how he would rather go on a cycling tour with his friends in another part of Europe as if Ireland does not have enough to offer him.

The first impression of the story reveals a Christmas party between acquaintances, however, at a closer glance, you can see that this story has symbols that represent Irish identity through Gabriel's inner awakening. In conclusion, throughout the story Joyce has characters reject Dublin, Ireland, and lessen the value the land has to offer. Joyce does this by having Gabriel

challenge his inner being to identify who he is. Mr. Bartell D'Arcy is a character who criticizes that Ireland is not only not what it was, but is pessimistic about its potential for the future. Conroy's conflicts within himself are enclosed between his Irish upbringing yet hold’s manner. Readers can see this with many encounters with Miss Ivor, however, she's the one reflecting on Gabriel's decision making. Whereas, the last page one can depict Gabriel is contemplating his own choices after hearing about Michael Furey, Gretta’s ex-lover who died. Conroy seems shocked to find out Gretta had been involved with someone before meeting him. Gabriel feels guilt when he realizes that another man was able to give his wife more love and passion than himself. It is through Michael that Gabriel has his epiphany. Gabriel’s intuition forms when he looks in the mirror and sees, “a ludicrous figure, acting as a pennyboy for his aunts, a nervous well-meaning sentimentalist, orating to vulgarians and idealizing his own clownish lusts, the pitiable fatuous fellow he had caught a glimpse of in the mirror”. This awareness brings honesty about himself, he is not who he thought he was. Gabriel is a pitiful human being and realizes he is more dead than he is alive. The moment Gabriel is looking through the window, he is allowing himself to connect with his Irish culture, it is the end of his hollow character and the beginning of his new self.