The Short Story The Dead By James Joyce: Gabriel Conroy Characteristic

In the short story, The Dead from the novel Dubliners by James Joyce, readers are led through a bustling, yet uniform, dinner party by, who I identify as the protagonist, Gabriel Conroy. He is an intelligent, impersonal, “cold-air” solitary man who is continually found present in his thoughts, rather than mentally present in the majority of the interactions within the story.

In the critical essay, I will explore the nature of Gabriel’s “paralysis”. During most of the story, it is plain to see that Gabriel is confined in his self-consciousness. Through Gabriel’s many mistakes—specifically in regards to his encounters with competitors and his mental responses to confrontations they bring forth—readers are able to follow and observe Gabriel “faintly falling” as well as the inherent need for his future epiphany that is to develop, made feasible only by James Joyce’s clever usage of these literary devices.

Joyce's intentions of Gabriel's antagonists is to incite or bring about conflict within the plotline for the novel to develop certain energy that draws the readers' attention. In doing so, the antagonists hold the ability to unveil specific characteristics of Gabriel through creating conflict and Gabriel's techniques of dealing with set conflicts, which otherwise may not be seen by readers. With the focus on Gabriel Conroy, the main protagonist in the novel, Mrs. Molly Ivors, one of many antagonists, produces disputes to expose Gabriel’s over-thinking nature. Gabriel runs into Mrs. Ivors, an Irish nationalist and somewhat close associate of his, at his aunts’ Christmas dinner where she playfully remarks her hearing of Gabriel’s work for a newspaper with political-leanings which support the ideals and differences of thinking.

Mrs. Ivors declares that she is disappointed in him and that he should be embarrassed by his actions. However, Gabriel responds that he isn’t. Ultimately, the taunting pushes Gabriel to the point of blatantly and openly pronouncing that he is 'sick' of his homeland after Mrs. Ivors questions him on how he'd rather visit other countries than travel throughout his homeland: “‘O, to tell you the truth,’ retorted Gabriel suddenly, ‘I’m sick of my own country, sick of it…’” (Joyce 129). Shaken with uncertainty and anxiety, Gabriel is reserved when Mrs. Ivors questions his motives why. Lastly, she playfully murmurs in his ear, “West Briton!”.

During the story following this encounter, he continually reflects on what Mrs. Ivors had said: “Was she sincere? Had she any life of her own behind all her propagandism? There had never been any ill-feeling between them until that night. It unnerved him to think that she would be at the supper-table, looking up at him while he spoke with her critical quizzing eyes. Perhaps she would not be sorry to see him fail in his speech” (Joyce 131). Gabriel then takes Mrs. Ivors's playfulness out of proportion by believing she may be condescendingly looking down on him. These thoughts continue to “warm-flood” his mind throughout the remainder of the story, even after she departs from the dinner party. Gabriel’s excessive, recurring thoughts and worries arising from his interaction with Molly, helps the readers to understand his nature of reflecting and over-analyzing every situation, particularly if the situation is not in his favor. Going along with the role of the antagonist is the omniscient narrator (third-person limited). With the appearance of this omniscient narrator, readers are provided the opportunity to further investigate the inner thoughts, motives, and characteristics of the story’s protagonist.

In the case of Gabriel Conroy, readers can perceive his true thoughts and motives to correctly interpret his over-thinking, over-analyzing character. When faced with conflict, Gabriel often retreats into his mind. This is a coping device in which he hides, reflects situations and analyzes minor details to determine what external characters may conceive of him, or preferably, what external characters are thinking altogether. After his Aunts' dinner gathering, Gabriel gazes at his Gretta, his wife. Gretta stands frozen at the top of the staircase, looking toward the area in which she discovers memorable music playing. Being hit with the sudden fascination of this "distant music" based image of his wife, he intends to seduce her into the same state of passion that she has inadvertently placed him in when they depart from the party. However, when his efforts falter, he angerly questions himself on what has his wife so preoccupied: "He was trembling now with annoyance. Why did she seem so abstracted? He did not know how he could begin. Was she annoyed, too, about something? If she would only turn to him or come to him of her own accord! To take her as she was would be brutal. No, he must see some ardor in her eyes first. He longed to be master of her strange mood" (Joyce 148). Troubled, annoyed and unfixed that his message is not being received, he seeks solutions solely by analyzing the details he notices. This is a principal example of Gabriel's overanalytical habits. Instead of simply asking Gretta what it is that is bothering her, Gabriel, once again, retreats into his mind to attempt to figure it out himself. Through the view of the omniscient narrator following Gabriel's train-of-thought when met with this dilemma, readers can come to understand his over-thinking nature in a way that may otherwise not be seen.