

# *An Analysis of The Dead from the Perspective of Literary Stylistics*

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**Keywords:** *The Dead*, literary stylistics, James Joyce

**Abstract:** *The Dead*, as the final work of James Joyce's collection of short stories *Dubliners*, has a unique language style and profound meaning. *The Dead* tells the story of Gabriel's mental transformation after he is frequently frustrated, showing the spiritual struggles of people at that time. From the perspective of literary stylistics, this essay analyzes how the fiction *The Dead* reflects the "spiritual paralysis" of Irish society and people at that time, and criticizes this phenomenon from the aspects of lexical features, syntactic features, figures of speech, and speech and thought presentation. On the syntactic level, this essay analyzes the role of sentence structure and grammar in conveying information. On the figures of speech, this essay analyzes the use of alliteration, repetition and parallelism, and symbols in *The Dead*. In the presentation of speech and thought, it demonstrates the features of free indirect speech in this short story by illustrating some examples.

## 1. Introduction

Irish writer James Joyce is world-renowned for his stream-of-consciousness works such as *Ulysses*. His earlier collection of short stories, *Dubliners*, also has an obscure, intricate, and unconventional style, although it's not as vague and complex as *Ulysses* and other stream-of-consciousness works. *Dubliners* is a collection of short stories centered around the city Dublin, with the theme of "paralysis" and "death", revealing the confusion, disappointment, anxiety, numbness, indifference, and the death of spirit of the lower and middle classes of Dubliners at that time. *The Dead*, as the final work of this collection, fully embodies the numbness of Irish society and people's spiritual paralysis in the 20th century. This short story depicts various details to show the "spiritual paralysis" of the society at that time. Joyce uses well-chosen words and sentences and a lot of figures of speech, such as parallelism, alliteration and symbolism and so on, portraying people who lack enthusiasm for life and a Christmas dance that looks lively but actually boring. From the perspective of literary stylistics, this essay analyzes how the fiction *The Dead* reflects the "spiritual paralysis" of Irish society and people at that time, and criticizes this phenomenon from the aspects of lexical features, syntactic features, figures of speech, and speech and thought presentation.

## 2. Literature Review

There are many studies about James Joyce by scholars from different countries, and one of popular

topics is the analysis of the views conveyed by Joyce's works, such as the sense of self and the inner world of a replacement child (Schellinski 2023) [18]. Among the studies of Joyce's works, there are more studies about *Ulysses* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, such as the study of the relationship between social science, fiction, and reality in *Ulysses* (Lukes 2022) [13] and the study of Stephen's neurotic self-estrangement (Farahmandian & Shao 2022) [3]. As for the collection of short stories *Dubliners*, this collection is usually regarded as a whole of the research objective. For example, through the analysis of these stories, these essays explicate how religion affects conscience (Nazarieh 2016) [16], the way in which the experience of the English colonization of Ireland was written onto every aspect of an Irishman's life (Elias 2016) [2], the art of losing in *Dubliners* (Gordon 1995) [6], and so forth.

Not many scholars have studied *The Dead*, and the studies focuses mainly on comparative analysis between *The Dead* and similar works, such as the comparative analysis of *The Dead* and Macrobius's *Saturnalia* (Fuchs 2020) [5], the analysis of intertextuality residing between James Joyce's short story *The Dead* and John Banville's novel *Snow* (Tan 2021) [22]. Studies of *The Dead* also include the influence of Joyce's personal experience on this fiction (Marsh 2011) [14], an evaluation of the article and the film adaptation (Meljac 2009) [15], an analysis of the characterizations of Gabriel and other characters in this story (Lorsch 2013; Dilworth 2014; Shovlin 2010) [12, 1, 20], and intertextual interpretation of music and text (Jok 2019) [8]. However, few researches have been done on the linguistic features of *The Dead*.

### 3. Methodology

In broad sense, stylistics is a study of style, and if we explore it in a narrower sense, as far as some modern researchers are concerned, "Stylistics is a method of textual interpretation in which primacy of place is assigned to language" (Simpson 2004: 2) [21]. As is mentioned above, stylistics focuses on analyzing language style with a linguistic method. Literary stylistics, as the name suggests, is a branch of stylistics concerning the study of literature. Firstly, stylistics uses linguistics to approach literary text. Secondly, the stylistic analysis is a less subjective, less personal method to interpret the text. Thirdly, stylistics emphasizes the aesthetic value of language. In a word, stylistics is going to relate the critic's concern of aesthetic appreciation with the linguist's concern of linguistic description. There is a cyclic motion whereby linguistic observation stimulates or modifies literary insight, and whereby literary insight in its turn stimulates further linguistic observation (Leech & Short 2001) [11]. Literary stylistics is an approach to the study of the stylistic features of literary works. It is most concerned with the application of linguistic techniques and how linguistic choices help construct the discourse. Leech (1969) [10] provides a detailed description of the analytical approach to the language of poetry, exploring issues such as deviation, foregrounding, and parallelism. According to Thornborrow and Wareing (1998) [23], the meaning resides in the text, but the contextual factor also influences the interpretation of the text. Based on these ideas, literary stylistics analyzes texts from the lexical level, syntactic level, and expression. In summary, literary stylistic analysis is carried out at various levels, such as lexical level, syntactic level, figure of speech, speech and thought presentation. And it focuses on analyzing those linguistic features that have stylistic significance and aesthetic value, starting from those foregrounded features, and digging into the author's linguistic intentions and linguistic effects, analyzing the aesthetic effects generated by linguistic choices in literary works. Through stylistic analysis, the reader can have a better understanding about the writer's writing style and the arrangement of the plots, as well as the presentation of themes.

Using literary stylistics to study *The Dead* means finding the relations between style and language choice, appreciating the literary or aesthetic function that Joyce wants to express. To make it in details, the analysis of *The Dead* will start from the linguistic categories of lexis, syntax, figure of speech,

speech and thought presentation to find its aesthetic value and the theme it renders.

## 4. Data Processing and Interpretation

### 4.1 Lexical Level

Lexicology studies the choice of specific lexical items or units of vocabulary in a text, their distribution in relation to one another, and their meaning. A writer's choice of words influences to a large extent the style and presentation of themes of his or her fictional works. This chapter will discuss the characteristics of the vocabulary chosen by Joyce in *The Dead*.

Joyce's choice of words plays a huge role in the portrayal of the characters in *The Dead*. Gabriel, the main character of this fiction, is an arrogant, pretentious but very sensitive person who realizes his egoism after experiencing three conflicts Lily, Miss Ivors, and his wife. Gabriel arrives at the dance and chats with Lily. After realizing that what he said was inappropriate, he wants to give Lily a coin as a Christmas gift, but Lily refuses, which makes feel greatly humiliated as a gentleman. In this sentence, the word "coloured" means blushed with embarrassment. Gabriel "coloured" because of different views on marriage between he and the housemaid Lily and her refusal to accept his coin as compensation, then he "kicked off" his shoes to conceal his anxiety: he thinks Lily is satirizing all men, including himself. And he still feels "discomposed" after the conversation is over. Gabriel feels his face blushed with embarrassment again when he talks with his colleague Miss Ivors. When Miss Ivors finds out that Gabriel writes for *The Daily Express*, Gabriel "coloured" once again. He sees nothing wrong with writing for *The Daily Express's* literary column, but when confronted by patriot Miss Ivors's blunt questioning, Gabriel becomes overwhelmed. It can be seen from these two blushes that Gabriel is a very sensitive person who cares about others' opinions.

Joyce's choice of adjectives for describing the characters' appearance is very apt for their characterization. The caretaker's daughter Lily as a growing girl, she may be curious about everything and yearning for love as her peers, but actually she shows a disappointment in love and men. She is already disheartened before love has even begun. As described in the article about her appearance, she is "a slim, growing girl", but her face is "pale", and her hair is "hay-coloured". Meanwhile, Gabriel's two aunts, Miss Kate and Miss Julia, seem to be hospitable and like to hold dances. However, from the writer's description of their appearance, readers can know that their mental state is not good. The description of their appearance uses many adjectives, such as "grey", "flaccid", "slow" and "shriveled", all of which are derogatory adjectives. Aunt Julia has gray hair and slow eyes. Aunt Kate is too feeble and her face is full of puckers and creases, which shows that they are old and have no vitality and enthusiasm. Although they have inherited the good tradition of Irish modesty and hospitality, they always follow the rules, stick to the beaten track, know nothing about new things, and live a boring and out of date life.

### 4.2 Syntactic Level

A sentence is an element, a unit, or a component of a text (Fowler 1991:5) [4]. How a sentence is arranged to express the meaning is of much significance for it implies the writer's ideas and themes. Any slight change of a sentence structure may lead to a huge difference in expressing the themes. Syntax can be used to refer to the knowledge that every speaker has of the language that they speak (Thornborrow & Wareing 1998) [23]. Syntax is often elaborately manipulated by the writers to generate literary values. According to the thematic structure, the writer usually places the information to be emphasized at the beginning of the sentence, and this emphasized content is usually the theme of the sentence.

In the sentence "*Distant Music* he would call the picture if he were a paint." (219) [9], "*Distant*

*Music*” is placed at the beginning of the sentence instead of the normal order “He would call the picture Distant Music if he were a painter.” “*Distance Music*” has become prominent because of its front position, which attracts a lot of attention from the reader and also delivers an important message. Before Gabriel and his wife Gretta left their aunts’ house, Gretta listens attentively on the stairs to Mr. Bartell D’Arcy singing the Irish folk song, *The Lass of Aughrim*, and Gabriel imagines that if he were a painter, he would draw this picture and name it *Distant Music*. Gretta listens intently because the song reminds her of her friend many years ago, while Gabriel is thinking about his wife. The relationship between them is like music, and there is a long distance. “Distant music” appears three times in the text, which not only refers to the music itself, but also reveals the estranged relationship between Gabriel and Gretta.

The sentence of this short story *The Dead* is not complex on the whole, but there are also some sentences that are difficult to understand, which are mainly Gabriel’s speech and thoughts. Because Gabriel is a university teacher and he is responsible for giving a speech at the annual Christmas dance, he represents a better educated, more sophisticated version of the average man. The sentence structures of Gabriel’s speech and thoughts are relatively complex. For example, Gabriel’s speech is full of long sentences using clauses, parentheses, and modifiers. Gabriel’s psychological activities also includes many sentences that take a little time to understand. For instance, after Gabriel knows the story between Gretta and Michael Furey, he looks at Gretta and imagines her as a little girl when she met Michael. “As he thought of what she must have been then, in that time of her first girlish beauty, a stranger, friendly pity for her entered his soul.” (232) [9] These characteristics reflect that Gabriel is a highly educated man and sometimes he sometimes feels complacent about his knowledge.

### 4.3 Figures of Speech

Figures of speech are forms of expression that depart from normal word or sentence order or from the common literal meanings of words, for the purpose of achieving a special fact: In literary works, they probably function to embellish, to emphasize or to clarify. They are used to give tone or atmosphere to discourse, to emphasize an idea or to achieve a special effect. A proper understanding of the figures of speech can help the target reader appreciate the text better. The repeated use of symbolism, alliteration, repetition, and parallelism is a unique feature of the language of *The Dead*. These figures of speech are easily observed by the readers. With the help of these figures of speech, Joyce aims to reinforce the crucial function of linguistic form in reflecting the theme of the work.

#### 4.3.1 Alliteration

Alliteration, the repetition of an initial consonant sound, is a widely used rhetoric in English literature. Applying alliteration properly in writing will increase musical senses to it and enhance its aesthetic value. Joyce made extensive use of alliteration in his poetry, prose, and fiction. In addition to the influence of Joyce’s own writing style, the use of alliteration in speech adds literary quality and leave the impression of well-educated. Such as in Gabriel’s speech, he says: “... and sometimes I fear that this new generation, educated or hypereducated as it is, will lack those qualities of humanity, of hospitality, of kindly humour which belonged to an older day.” (212) [9] In this sentence, “of humanity, of hospitality, of kindly humour” is an example of the use of alliteration. Not only is it catchy to read, but it also can shape Gabriel’s characteristic: he is very knowledgeable and also likes to show off what he knows.

#### 4.3.2 Repetition and Parallelism

Repetition refers to the repeated use of the same word, phrase or structure in a sentence, paragraph, or passage, in which the author makes some words or sentences repeated to reinforce the emotion of

the character. Repetition plays an essential role in expressing themes and ideas hidden in this short story. The use of repetition of words and sentences is very common in Gabriel's speeches. The story mentions that Gabriel is busy polishing the words and content of his speech while dancing and talking with others, which shows that the repetition of words is not only Joyce's writing style, but Gabriel's intention to make this speech uniquely structured and retouched. For example, Gabriel uses "it is not the first time that..." twice at the beginning of his speech to express his gratitude to his aunts for holding the annual Christmas dance. In the second paragraph, he repeatedly mentioned "new generation", "new ideas" and "new principals" to compare the old days and the new generation, and connect the theme of "hospitality" in the first part of the speech with the theme of "sad memories" in the third part. In the whole speech, "hospitable" and "hospitality" are repeatedly emphasized to highlight that "the good ladies" inherited "the tradition of genuine warm-hearted courteous Irish hospitality". In the toast at the end of his speech, Gabriel repeatedly mentioned what they "hold" to express his praise and blessings to the three women.

Parallelism, in its grammar form, refers a balance of two, three, or more similar words, phrases, or clauses. It uses the grammatical constructions to express ideas which are similar or equal in importance. In the novel, parallelism is used frequently to enrich the literary features. The use of parallelism is also common in Gabriel's speech, such as "...of humanity, of hospitality, of kindly humour..." (212) [9] and "...of the past, of youth, of changes, of absent faces..." (212) [9].

The parallelism is used elsewhere in the story, except in Gabriel's speech. After the dance, when Gabriel is alone with his wife, the flame of his love for Gretta is rekindled. "He longed to cry to her from his soul, to crush her body against his, to overmaster her." (227) [9] Parallel structure of "to...her..." emphasizes Gabriel's intense love for his wife, which contrasts sharply with Gabriel's devastation after he knows the story between Gretta and Michael Furey.

The use of repetition and parallelism makes Gabriel's speech uniquely structured and elegant, fully demonstrating his knowledge and talent, and full of clichés. Gabriel also realizes later that he is "a nervous, well-meaning sentimentalist, orating to vulgarians and idealising his own clownish lusts" (230) [9].

### 4.3.3 Symbolism

In this whole story, there are many symbols appearing. Joyce always keeps a sharp eye on some symbolism, like the name, number and so on, which are important to the story. Therefore, only through the accurate understanding of these symbols, can readers fully comprehend the deep implied meaning of this fiction and its artistic effects.

One of the most important symbols in *The Dead* is snow, which appears many times in the text and throughout the story. From the time Gabriel enters the house, his clothes and shoes are covered with snow. This is the first time the imagery of snow appears, which was falling at the time. Then, before Gabriel's speech, he is thinking about his speech and quotations while looking out of the window at the snowy scene. And before Gabriel's speech, he imagined the snow scenery in the park outside. By this time the snow has accumulated on the branches of the trees and the Wellington Monument, and the land has turned white. By the end of the article, Ireland is covered with snow everywhere. By this time, the scope of the snow is expanding, just as the "spiritual paralysis" gradually eroded Ireland. At the same time, the snow symbolizes the revival of life. In winter, the snow covers the land, showing a depressed scene, but when spring comes, everything revives, and it is a vibrant scene, as Joyce hopes, people can get rid of "spiritual paralysis" and revitalize Ireland.

In addition to the symbolism of snow, the choice of names of people and places in this fiction can also help shape the theme. First of all, the name of the main character, Gabriel, which has different meanings in different religions. It could be both the archangel responsible for delivering messages for God and the angel of death, which matches the state of the protagonist. He is not only proud of

his intellectual identity, but also incompatible with the people and surroundings; he inherits the best traditions of his country, but he also able to accept and strongly introduce foreign advanced civilization to his country; he has grown up in Irish culture, but he feels powerless against its decay.

At the end of the novel, Gabriel realizes that “The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward.” (234) [9] “Journey westward” can be interpreted as going to the west of Ireland, which is considered to be the place where the Irish culture and traditions have been best preserved. As Gabriel argues with patriot Miss Ivors, Miss Ivors suggests that Gabriel and his wife take a vacation in the Aran Isles, located on the west coast of Ireland, instead of going abroad. Meanwhile, Gabriel’s wife, Gretta, is from Connacht in the west of Ireland and she has been thinking of Michael Furey, who is a representative of traditional Irish culture. Combined with Joyce’s usual writing technique “epiphany”, which mean at a certain moment people suddenly understand what is important realize the true meaning of life (Head 1992) [7], it can be concluded that “journey westward” here means searching for the traditional Irish culture. Gabriel has a new understanding of his marriage, his life, and of Irish society. He realizes the “spiritual paralysis” of Irish people and the gradual decline of Irish society and culture, but at the same time, he also has a new understanding of life and death, and still looks forward to the “revival” of himself and Ireland.

#### 4.4 Speech and Thought Presentation

According to Short’s (1996) [19] understanding of the hierarchy of fictional discourse and the relationship between participants, the discourse of fiction includes at least six participants, and each participant has its own perspective. Quirk and other scholars (1989) [17] classify discourse paraphrases into four categories: direct speech, indirect speech, free direct speech, and free indirect speech, based on the syntactic morphology and structure of discourse paraphrases, including the use of quoting clauses or quotation marks, transformation of tense and person. Free Indirect Speech is a form of expression in which direct quotation is transformed into the narrator’s speech, which is a writing technique that directly expresses the inner thoughts and actions of a character. The use of free indirect speech shows character’s thought in multiple perspectives, and the character in the story evolve into the narrators of his own stories.

After his three conflicts with Lily, Miss Ivors, and his wife Gretta, Gabriel looks out the window and it starts to snow again. This passage blurs the inner and outer worlds, combines the subjective and objective narrative and blend the writer’s perspective with Gabriel’s. The use of this free indirect speech makes the character’s speech and thought more authentic, and avoids the abrupt change caused by the point of view and tense.

#### 5. Conclusion

This essay analyzes James Joyce’s *The Dead* from the perspective of literary stylistics. On the lexical level, this essay focuses on how Joyce’s choice of words contributes to the shaping of the fiction’s theme. On the syntactic level, this essay analyzes the role of sentence structure and grammar in conveying information. On the figures of speech, this essay analyzes the use of alliteration, repetition and parallelism, and symbols in *The Dead*, and the use of these figures of speech enhances the literary quality of the short story and vividly portray the characteristics of Gabriel. In the presentation of speech and thought, it demonstrates the features of free indirect speech in this short story by illustrating some examples. After the literary stylistic analysis of *The Dead*, the readers can have a better understanding about this fiction, have a general idea about Joyce’s writing style in this period, and understand the “spiritual paralysis” that Joyce satirized.

However, this study still has limitations. Firstly, the analysis and understanding of the samples selected above are the products of my personal understanding. Secondly, the samples are limited and

cannot represent the whole work. Finally, due to the author's limited theoretical competence, the way to analyze the issue may not be deep and comprehensive enough. More case studies with larger samples need to be conducted. But it is still hoped that this study will be helpful to relevant learners.

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