



## Engaging Today's High School Students with "The Dead"

Dylan Emerick-Brown  
*Deltona High School, Deltona, Florida*

Typically, a high-school English teacher would not voluntarily offer up James Joyce to the ravenous critiques of tenth graders, nor would a typical high-school English teacher feel wholly at ease subjecting twenty-first-century teenagers to one of the most intimidating writers of the twentieth century. There are ways in which to circumnavigate the short attention spans and judgmental eye rolls of teenagers when approaching Joyce, however, and, more importantly, to make him not only accessible but fascinating to them. Instead of attempting to pull Joyce into the twenty-first century to which my students are accustomed, I decided to push them into the unfamiliar early-twentieth-century Dublin of Joyce's "The Dead."<sup>1</sup> What I discovered was that they found Joyce and "The Dead" both challenging and worth the challenge.

The customized unit I created surrounding "The Dead" is designed to encompass an entire quarter of the school year with the Cambridge Advanced International Certificate of Education (AICE/Cambridge) program in mind. The unit is made up of various lessons, though each of them can be shortened, lengthened, or cut entirely in order to fit within the planning calendar of one of my regular or honors English II classes. The unit is designed so that each student slowly builds an individual portfolio containing helpful handout resources, notes, and analyses used as assessments throughout the unit. The culminating portfolio grade is a compilation of these analyses, and a table of contents is given to the students to help them with organization and expectation. All of the resources in this unit for students and teachers can be found on <TeachingJoyce.com>. Since this is a living unit, it is always adapting to the new students in class and changing to meet their needs.

It is important to note that there are very conscious decisions in the construction of the various lessons to help break down the text of "The Dead" as well as to support the students' comprehension of the intricacies that make it a literary goliath of English-language short stories. One of these strategies is a strong emphasis on text-based debate, discussion, and writing. Discussion allows the students as a class, verbally and collaboratively, to work out their thoughts and

*James Joyce Quarterly*, Volume 56, Number 3-4 (Spring-Summer 2019), pp. . Copyright © for the JJQ, University of Tulsa, 2019. All rights to reproduction in any form are reserved.

ideas in a safe environment as well as to question their own—and others’—gradually forming opinions. Debates allow the students openly to challenge various critiques while also putting forward analyses of their own. Written assignments in the form of short responses or essays ensure that the students are organizing, synthesizing, and clearly expressing their analyses in a format that can more easily be shared with others.

There is a connecting thread that binds all of this together: text-based evidence. For every question posed or responded to, the students must provide text-based evidence to lend credibility and validity to their stances. For every critique challenged in a debate, the students must support their dissent or alternative analyses with text-based evidence. And for every perspective shared in a short response or essay, the students must reinforce their opinions with text-based evidence. This is the key to accurate and effective literary analysis.

Differentiation of instruction is also a teaching strategy employed in this unit since a teacher’s flexibility is important in meeting the ever-changing needs of the students. Various lessons may lend themselves better to formative or summative assessments. Depending on the level of depth the students are expected to reach in the text, a short response versus an essay may be appropriate, and the amount of time allotted for the lesson due to either district restraints or the unexpected performances of the students may require the blending, eliminating, or further expansion of various lessons.

Finally, to ensure that students do not become overwhelmed or frustrated with repetitive or drawn-out lessons, there is a great deal of variety in how the lessons are taught. This involves having them engage in independent work as well as small-group work. Some lessons require short responses, while others require essays or even graphic organizers. Graded assessments may also include the level of participation in a classroom discussion or debate, as well as peer-editing their fellow students’ work. Additionally, some prompts may be required for all students to answer, while other lessons allow students to choose one or more prompts based on their particular interests. This flexibility and freedom provides room for each individual student to satisfy his or her own curiosity and to stimulate queries, perhaps looking even further to justify a newly formed analysis or seeking a challenge in a previously unexpected direction.

To help provide context for “The Dead,” we begin with a background in the history of Catholicism versus Protestantism in Ireland, which can be associated with Mr. Browne in the story, as well as with the unionist versus Home-Rule movement surrounding the sociopolitical leanings of Molly Ivors and Gabriel Conroy. The conversation is facilitated by handouts containing images of Henry VIII, Elizabeth I, and Martin Luther. Also included is a map of Ireland highlighting

the Pale as well as regions such as Connacht with descriptions of the geopolitics of Ireland in the early twentieth century. This is followed by a brief background presentation on Joyce and *Dubliners*, including various literary terms applicable to “The Dead” and potential important themes. For the visual students, a Google Maps image showcasing the route Gabriel and Gretta Conroy take from 15 Usher’s Island to the Gresham Hotel in the story is provided for spacial clarity. Stoneybatter, the neighborhood from which the Morkans had moved, is also visible to the north in the map. This all comes together to form a solid context, both visually and historically, from which the students can build their comprehension as they read further.

The meat and potatoes of the unit is, of course, “The Dead” itself. Throughout the story, there are highlighted words and phrases in bold to correspond with a vocabulary sheet the students will have for reference. From galoshes and Beannacht libh to corn-factor and West Briton, the students feel less intimidated by unfamiliar language and terminology with this reliable resource at their fingertips. Depending on time and the avidity of the class, the students may be given the occasion and resources—such as their ever-present cell phones—to define and discuss the terms and phrases highlighted in the story.

Slowly, and with passion, we complete our first reading of “The Dead” with minimal breaks for discussion and for the full effect of the story to sink in. At the end of the packet given to the students, including a copy of the story itself and the vocabulary reference sheet, is a compilation of seventy-six analytical questions. They are organized, in order, under the header of the page number to which the question refers. This again helps alleviate some of the intimidation of the thirty-four pages of text of “The Dead” and the seventy-six questions and allows the students to hone in on specific scenes within the story to address the prompts.

The seventy-six questions are divided among small groups of three to four students. They are given a few days to work on these queries, collaborating and developing full responses with text-based evidence. Examples of these questions include:

27) Explain what you can learn about Gabriel’s mother from the detail of her choosing the names of her sons: Gabriel and Constantine. Consider the occupation of Constantine.

28) In the portrait of Gabriel’s mother, Ellen, she is pointing to an open book on her lap. There are two potential allusions here. One has to do with Ellen’s piety (see question 27) and the other has to do with the Conroy family (research the Conroy family surname and the “Conroy coat of arms). Explain both allusions and which of her sons might tie in with each. Follow-up: in regard to the meaning behind the Conroy name, what could it mean that, despite its being Gabriel’s, the name has more connection to Gretta’s roots?

Given the above examples, the students could discuss not only the religious proclivity of the Conroy family as it may apply to the socio-political issues of early-twentieth-century Ireland, but they would also be encouraged to research the Conroy family coat of arms. This family crest contains within it the image of an open book—symbolic of religion (the Bible) and learning—exactly like the one described in the portrait of Gabriel’s mother. This alludes to the paths each of Ellen’s sons took in life: Gabriel went to the university while Constantine joined the clergy. This provides further hints about the family values with which Gabriel struggles while reflecting on this portrait, his dinner speech, and the relationship of his late mother and his wife, Gretta.

When the students have fully developed their responses, two or three days are set aside for group presentations. Each group stands before the class to read their questions aloud and present their analyses. Meanwhile, other students are following along on the appropriate pages of the story and taking notes. By the end of the group presentations, the entire class will have experienced a full and holistic analysis of “The Dead.” Paying attention and taking good notes is essential as twenty questions will be chosen from the seventy-six for an open-note quiz later.

The next item in the unit is a Gabriel Character Analysis. This is the first of three lessons to incorporate supplemental texts written by Joyce to assist in the holistic comprehension of “The Dead.” In the Gabriel Character Analysis, the students will read three letters written by Joyce to his eventual wife, Nora Barnacle. This is followed by a brief class discussion on first impressions and potential connections with the story. Each letter is given an analysis prompt. Individually, students choose one of the letters and its associated prompt. Then they create a character-analysis graphic organizer in which the left side of a sheet of paper is labeled “James Joyce” and the right side is labeled “Gabriel Conroy.” On the left, the students write out personality traits they detect in Joyce based on his letter, as well as any potentially relevant or interesting lines from the letter to support their characterization. The same is done on the right for Gabriel Conroy in the scene from “The Dead” referenced in the prompt. From this, students can literally draw connections, see patterns, or note similarities. Below the graphic organizer, in a short response designed to run no longer than half of a page, the students address their prompt with textual evidence, organized from the chart they just created. A day could be set aside for peer review and discussion to help settle any potentially lingering uncertainty or disjointed thoughts as to where to take these analyses. The students’ final drafts are shared with the class when finished. A sample letter from Joyce to Nora in *Letters I, II, or III*,<sup>2</sup> and the associated prompt, would be:

To Nora Barnacle

[26 September 1904]

7 S. Peter's Terrace, Cabra, Dublin

My dearest Nora I must tell you how desolate I have felt since last night. I was thinking, with my usual way of regarding things, that I had a cold but I am sure it is more than a physical ailment. How little words are necessary between us! We seem to know each other though we say nothing almost for hours. I often wonder do you realise [it]. . . . The mere recollection of you overpowers me with some kind of dull slumber. The energy which is required for carrying on conversations seems to have left me lately and I find myself constantly slipping into silence. In a way it seems to me a pity that we do not say more to each other and yet I know how futile it is for me to remonstrate either with you or with myself for I know that when I meet you next our lips will become mute. You see how I begin to babble in these letters. And yet why should I be ashamed of words? Why should I not call you what in my heart I continually call you? What is it that prevents me unless it be that no word is tender enough to be your name?  
JIM

Write if you find time. (*LettersII* 56)

ANALYSIS: Review page 214 of "The Dead." Consider the connection between the last lines of Joyce's letter above and Gabriel's letter to Gretta. Analyze how Joyce's letter can help the reader better comprehend what Gabriel's emotions and motives are in this particular scene.

The last line of Joyce's letter preceding his signature connects to the lines from "The Dead" in which Gabriel reflects on a letter he had written to his wife: "In one letter that he had written to her then he had said: *Why is it that words like these seem to me so dull and cold? Is it because there is no word tender enough to be your name?*" (D 214). This similarity encourages the students to analyze the emotional state and motivation of Gabriel through the context of Joyce's letter. It also helps further to develop the characters' complexities and value to the overall story.

The second of the three lessons to incorporate Joyce's other works is a text comparison between "The Dead" and Joyce's play, *Exiles*.<sup>3</sup> Various excerpts from scenes in the play are given to the students with brief contextual backgrounds as to what is happening at that point in the drama. These are followed by analysis questions pertaining to a comparison between the scene in the play and a moment in "The Dead." Again, students are allowed to choose from the excerpts the ones on which they would like to focus, and the resulting analyses are shared with the class, followed by a debate and critique. The different scenes and prompts also offer various degrees of challenge. Whereas some comparisons may appear obvious at first glance, subtleties within the dialogue can offer previously unseen depth to their

analyses. Below is a sample excerpt and prompt from *Exiles*:

In the following scene from Act I, Richard and his wife, Bertha, have returned home from a trip to Rome. In their home, Beatrice—a family friend, music instructor, and former lover of Richard’s while in Rome—goes with Richard’s eight-year-old son, Archie, upstairs to practice a short piano lesson, leaving her cousin, Robert, alone downstairs with Bertha. Richard is aware of the potential affair and has left the house earlier upon seeing Robert’s approach. At this point, Bertha and Robert have not consummated their emotional affair.

*BEATRICE and ARCHIE go out together by the door on the left. Bertha goes towards the davenport, takes off her hat and lays it with her sunshade on the desk. Then taking a key from a little flower vase, she opens a drawer of the davenport, takes out a slip of paper and closes the drawer again. Robert stands watching her.*

*BERTHA, coming towards him with the paper in her hand:* You put this into my hand last night. What does it mean?

*ROBERT:* Do you not know?

*BERTHA, reads:* “There is one word which I have never dared to say to you.” What is the word?

*ROBERT:* That I have a deep liking for you.

*A short pause. The piano is heard faintly from the upper room.*

*ROBERT, takes the bunch of roses from the chair:* I brought these for you. Will you take them from me?

*BERTHA, taking them:* Thank you. *She lays them on the table and unfolds the paper again.* Why did you not dare to say it last night?

*ROBERT* I could not speak to you or follow you. There were too many people on the lawn. I wanted you to think over it and so I put it into your hand when you were going away.

*BERTHA:* Now you have dared to say it.

*ROBERT, moves his hand slowly past his eyes:* You passed. The avenue was dim with dusky light. I could see the dark green masses of the trees. And you passed beyond them. You were like the moon.

*BERTHA, laughs.* Why like the moon?

*ROBERT:* In that dress, with your slim body, walking with little even steps. I saw the moon passing in the dusk till you passed and left my sight.

*BERTHA:* Did you think of me last night?

*ROBERT, comes nearer:* I think of you always—as something beautiful and distant—the moon or some deep music. (E 30-32)

**ANALYSIS:** Consider the last line of this excerpt spoken by Robert. Reread page 24 of “The Dead” and look for a connection or similarity. Joyce uses very similar language in these two texts to describe the same basic thing. Explain what Joyce is describing in both scenes and analyze why he invests these scenes with this particular language.

The last lines from the *Exiles* excerpt connect beautifully to the

scene in “The Dead” when Gabriel looks up at his wife at the top of the stairs while she is lost in secret memories, listening to “The Lass of Aughrim.” Students particularly like this lesson and often ask to read *Exiles* on their own. I provide them with printed-out copies and usually end by discussing the play with them at lunch. It is commonly perceived in our discussions that Joyce was exercising a sort of introspective therapy in his writing. “During our unit focusing on ‘The Dead,’ I found that it was reassuring to see a famous author use writing as a form of therapy, even if he refused to acknowledge this. Joyce substituted his wife and himself for the main characters Gretta and Gabriel to explore his fears of the unknown. It inspires me to use writing as an outlet for pent-up emotions and fears,” wrote Sarah B., one of the participants in the class. The students often find parallels between Joyce’s life and the dilemmas in “The Dead” and *Exiles* and speculate that it is almost as though he is trying to work out his insecurities over Nora’s past lovers.

The third, and final, usage of Joyce’s other works to analyze “The Dead” is in the last text comparison between the short story and one of Joyce’s poems from the *Collected Poems* entitled “She Weeps Over Ragoon.”<sup>4</sup> In this association, the students read the poem and discuss its rhyme scheme, tone, plot, and purpose. Then, in a short response, the students individually analyze the comparison between the poem—in which a woman standing outside in the cold, rainy night calls out to her lover to let her inside—and the story Gretta tells Gabriel about Michael Furey, who stood outside her window on a cold and rainy night, calling to her. There is even the similarity of alliteration in the first line of the poem, “Rain on Ragoon falls softly, softly falling. . . .” (*CP* 50) and the final line of *Dubliners*: “His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead” (*D* 224).

These analyses of text comparisons allow the students to witness Joyce’s inspirations, the methodology of his writing style, and the depth of his fictional characters as they pertain to either himself, Gabriel Conroy, or the real people on whom the characters are based such as Nora (Gretta Conroy) or Joyce’s mother’s aunts (the Morkan sisters).

Given the extent to which the students are exploring “The Dead,” it is worth including a lighter assignment that could be used for extra credit or perhaps given in the format of a class crossword-puzzle, Jeopardy-style game. This assignment is called “Finding the Muses,” and it provides the students with over a dozen biographical and historical pieces of information surrounding Joyce and the Dublin in which he grew up. For the astute student, the comparisons between real life and fiction will be quickly visible. An example of this would

be that Joyce's mother, Mary Jane Murray, had aunts named Mrs. Lyons and Mrs. Ellen Callanan who gave music lessons at 15 Usher's Island. This ties in beautifully with the Morkan sisters—the aunts of Gabriel Conroy—who live at 15 Usher's Island with their star music pupil, Mary Jane. And the comparison between Nora Barnacle and Gretta Conroy is unmistakable because of their births in Galway, their living with their grandmothers, their schooling in convents, and their falling in love with boys named Michael who passed away when they were young. This is a great opportunity to have fun with the students in a game like a scavenger hunt, while rewarding those who pay close attention, as the class delves even deeper into the inspirations for "The Dead."

For diversity, other paired and group activities were designed to allow the students to embrace their creativity while analyzing "The Dead." In the paired activity, students pretend that one is a marriage counselor and the other is Gretta Conroy in order to have a dialogue and develop ideas for improving Gretta and Gabriel's relationship. The literary persona—in this case, Gretta—must attempt to stay in character based on what is in the story in order to embody an appropriate perspective. The marriage counselor writes an analysis of the issues affecting the relationship and also proposes advice for healing it. Then the students switch roles, and the literary character of Gabriel Conroy is included. When finished with both sessions, the students will compare notes to see if there are similarities and differences in the analyses of the relationship (with proposed issues and proposed advice). Together, the students come up with a joint analysis, explaining why they advocate particular advice for each character, as well as advice for both as a couple. Also included is a Perceptions Analysis in which the students examine what the issues plaguing the Conroy marriage might say about early-twentieth-century Dubliners and what the proposed advice might say about early-twenty-first-century Americans. At the end, students present to the class their joint analysis of the couple.

The group activity is designed for up to four students who are to write for the *Dublin Times*. They cover the most anticipated event of the season: the Morkan sisters' annual party. The group compiles articles written by each student posing as a social writer, political writer, literary critic, and feminist writer. All will come together to write, edit, and "publish" a four-article section of the *Dublin Times*, and each author will have a particular critical focus from which to view the story: the social writer will have a sociological criticism focus; the political writer will have a new historicism focus; the literary critic will have a formalist criticism focus on Gabriel's dinner speech; and the feminist writer will have a gender-criticism focus.



The sociological critic will examine a literary text in economic, cultural, and political context. The student will consider the social classes at the party, forms of entertainment representative of this period, and colloquialisms of the time. The new historicist will look at the political, ideological, and social customs, focusing on the party from a historical perspective with commentary on politics and social-class strife. The formalist critic will analyze Gabriel's dinner speech, honing in on literary elements and interpretation. This student will criticize, for better or worse, everything from the length and purpose of the speech to the focus on audience and various elements and allusions utilized, ultimately judging the success or failure of Gabriel's speech. And finally, the gender critic will examine how the male and female characters interact with one another as well as how their dress, manner of speech, or behavior might reveal certain traits related to the social norms of early-twentieth-century Dublin society regarding gender.

Finally, the portfolio concludes with an analysis paper. This is an in-depth essay written by individual students. The prompt is more or less of their choosing, however. They are allowed to pitch prompts to the teacher for approval, ones inspired by the work they have done throughout the unit. The inspiration for each essay prompt could come from one of the seventy-six questions attached to the story, the letters written by Joyce to Nora, the comparison of the short story to excerpts from *Exiles*, Joyce's poetry, or even Joyce's own biographical information pertaining to the characters populating "The Dead." This flexibility allows the students further to explore particular areas of interest that they either want to learn more about or to demonstrate their mastery of the assignment.

It is essential that every unit has a chance for students to remediate work in case they struggled along the way. To this end, there are two remedial assignments students can tackle to improve previous grades. They both deal with political cartoons of nineteenth-century Britain. Both assignments with their political illustrations connect with the political, racial, and social themes felt strongly throughout "The Dead." The first concerns "The Irish Frankenstein," which was published by *Punch* in 1882 and illustrated by John Tenniel.<sup>5</sup> For part I, the students analyze the cartoon to determine the central theme conveyed in the illustration. Part II includes the little-known editorial that preceded the cartoon in the original publication, also titled "The Irish Frankenstein."<sup>6</sup> This editorial was fashioned to seem as though it was written by Mary Shelley, though it never overtly claims that. Thirty-nine percent of the text is appropriated from Shelley's *Frankenstein* while the other 61 percent is original to the unknown author. Words are substituted; phrases are changed; and it is difficult to tell where Shelley's thoughts begin and the editors' end. I have bro-

ken down who wrote what with original words and phrases included in brackets to help guide the students. They must then determine what the author was attempting to do in this strategically manipulative editorial.

The other remediation assignment addresses *Punch's* 1870 illustration by Tenniel entitled "The Irish 'Tempest.'" The students are given very little information other than the terms written on the Caliban-esque creature such as "Ultramontanism," "Ribandism," and "Fenianism." This assignment requires a lot of research in the various terms as well as the Landlord and Tenant Act of 1870 and William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and usually culminates in an informative essay explaining the theme and purpose of this particular cartoon.

Student responses to this unit have been overwhelmingly positive. At first, there was concern that spending an entire quarter of a year on one short story could become boring or monotonous, but students have been quickly drawn in, and they engaged in the variety of supplemental resources from the historical context and letters to explore the poetry and drama. They also felt respected and valued in the permission given to them to choose various directions in which to take their deepening education in the many lessons. Students were allowed to use their cell phones and other technology in order to conduct further research, and they were surprised at how willingly they were transported to the unfamiliar early-twentieth-century Dublin as opposed to having "The Dead" modernized to fit within their comfort zones.

It is also worth noting that, following the unit on "The Dead," the students delve into *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, complete with in-class discussions and a critical analysis paper, written from perspectives such as psychoanalytic, Marxist, gender studies, moral, formalist, or structuralist. In this unit, students become attached to Stephen Dedalus, who, for most of the novel, is their age. He has been described by some as a less whiny Holden Caulfield with an Irish accent. At the end of this unit, students have the option of joining the *Ulysses* Reading Group, an extracurricular weekly meeting after school that lasts three-quarters of the school year. Students are engaged in the discussions, and a few even write papers that they send out for publication or presentation by the end. Their voluntary work on *Ulysses* can also act to remediate past grades in their English course. To fully appreciate all of these Joycean components of the course, everything can be found at <TeachingJoyce.com.>

The goal of this unit was to make a writer as complex as Joyce accessible to today's high school students without diluting his work and rendering it more facile. It was made clear to the students from the beginning that this would be a challenge, but it was also emphasized that if they paid attention, participated, and remained engaged,

then the challenge would be well worth it. Despite initial skepticism, students were intrigued by one of Joyce's shorter, less linguistically experimental stories as opposed to jumping into *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake*, though quite a few quickly become young Joyceans and explore Joyce's works further on their own or in the *Ulysses* Reading Group. "The Dead" allowed for an investigation into realistic characters in realistic situations, not too far removed from the kinds of people and scenarios well known to my students. And yet, "The Dead" also offered a depth of complexity that made the exploration through Irish history, social norms, class differences, religious divides, and human motivations entertaining as well as educational. With these various types of lessons, exploration of Joyce's other works, and lively class discussions, my classroom quickly became a perfect ground zero for the next generation of Joyceans. And it was just as rewarding for me to see young students today approaching James Joyce in a new light, with curiosity and anticipation.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> James Joyce, "The Dead," *"Dubliners": Text, Criticism, and Notes*, ed. Robert Scholes and A. Walton Litz (New York: Viking Press, 1969). Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text by *D* and the page number.

<sup>2</sup> Joyce, *Letters of James Joyce, Volume I*, ed. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Viking Press, 1957), *Letters of James Joyce, Volume II*, ed. Richard Ellmann (New York: Viking Press, 1966), and *Letters of James Joyce, Volume III*, ed. Ellmann (New York: Viking Press, 1966). Further references to the first volume will be cited parenthetically in the text by *Letters I* and the page number.

<sup>3</sup> Joyce, *Exiles* (New York: Viking Press, 1951). Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text by *E* and the page number.

<sup>4</sup> Joyce, "She Weeps Over Ragoon," *Collected Poems* (New York: Viking Press, 1957), p. 50. Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text by *CP* and the page number.

<sup>5</sup> John Tenniel, "The Irish Frankenstein," *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 88 (20 May 1882), 235.

<sup>6</sup> "The Irish Frankenstein," *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 88 (20 May 1882), 234.

<sup>7</sup> Tenniel, "The Irish 'Tempest,'" *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 58 (19 March 1870), 112.

