Gabriel’s Epiphany

“The Dead” by James Joyce, from “Dubliners” (1914)

How does the use of language and narrative techniques express all that troubles Gabriel’s mind

The extract is characterized by two different levels of narration: the first one belongs to an external non omniscient narrator who, right from the first paragraph, accurately describes Gabriel’s wife Gretta sleeping, while the second one describes, through the literary device of the interior monologue, the protagonist’s stream of consciousness, making the reader aware of his inner feelings and emotions.

“She was fast asleep”: a short and concise sentence marks the beginning of the extract. The woman is lying on the bed, peacefully sleeping with “deep-drawn breath”, while Gabriel is tormented by a series of thoughts about the sense of his existence. The contrast between the two figures is also highlighted by the position of the personal pronoun “she”, immediately followed by the name “Gabriel”, which is also in a dominant position.

The first section of the extract describes in a very detailed way Gabriel’s bedroom and his wife and it aims at creating an atmosphere of peace and silence that well anticipates the character’s deep reflections about the sense of his life. While looking at Gretta, Gabriel realizes what a “poor part he, her husband, had played in her life”. Indeed, he feels that Mr. Michael Furey, the boy who died to see his wife one last time before her departure from her native village, is more alive than him. All the old convictions (also represented by Gabriel’s strong familiar tradition) and the concrete points of reference seem to fall under his feet. Nothing, even his marriage, is completely under his control: he feels anguished and lost.

Gabriel realizes to be unable to feel that passion that Mr. Furey once felt for his wife and reflects on his inability to feel strong emotions: he is cold and rigid like the snow that, in that moment, is falling down on Dublin. On the other side, Gretta is only described physically: there is no reference to her inner feelings and her iage is strongly in contrast with that of her husband. The aim of the writer is to investigate Gabriel’s psyche: he doesn’t want to focus the reader’s attention on the character of Gretta (whose name is not mentioned in this paragraph, as to underline the marginality of her figure), who is only a pretext to make Gabriel reflect on the sense of his life.

The description of Gretta’s appearance recalls into Gabriel’s mind some thoughts: every passage is connected to the previous and the following one not by a chronological order, but by free logical associations that happen in the character’s mind. This is also underlined by the frequent shifts in space and time, a consequence of the continuous flowing of the so-called “stream of consciousness” that characterizes the character’s psyche. The episode of Mr. Furey’s death, also recalled in the previous part of the short story by Gretta, who is emotionally moved by a song she heard at their aunts’ home, belongs to the past, while in the second paragraph Gabriel images a possible and probable future in which his aunt Kate will be crying at her elder sister’s funeral.

Death permeates the past and the future: “One by one they were all becoming shades”, but some shades are maybe more concrete and alive than some alive men (as in the case of Michael Furey and Gabriel, whose personality is slowly fading into death as he becomes older). Gabriel realizes that his life has been a total failure: “Better pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dismally with age”.

“Generous tears filled Gabriel’s eyes”: this short sentence marks the beginning of the so-called “epiphany”, a revealing moment when the main character becomes aware of his real condition, which is one without any concrete and stable point of reference. Gabriel is here presented as an anti-hero, a man not at all made by himself, but a man full of weaknesses and uncertainties. His attachment of the old traditions of his family (which is also a symbol for the paralysis of Dublin, symbolically represented by the snow) represents an attempt to find something stable in a world full of contradictions and uncertainties.