


Summer 2015

UNDERSTANDING THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE THROUGH SHORT STORY: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF FOUR STORIES FROM JAMES JOYCE'S DUBLINERS AND GEORGE SAUNDERS' TENTH OF DECEMBER

Patrick Gallagher
John Carroll University, pgallagher13@jcu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://collected.jcu.edu/mastersessays>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gallagher, Patrick, "UNDERSTANDING THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE THROUGH SHORT STORY: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF FOUR STORIES FROM JAMES JOYCE'S DUBLINERS AND GEORGE SAUNDERS' TENTH OF DECEMBER" (2015). *Masters Essays*. 27.

<http://collected.jcu.edu/mastersessays/27>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Essays, and Senior Honors Projects at Carroll Collected. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Essays by an authorized administrator of Carroll Collected. For more information, please contact connell@jcu.edu.

UNDERSTANDING THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE
THROUGH SHORT STORY:
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF FOUR STORIES
FROM JAMES JOYCE'S *DUBLINERS*
AND GEORGE SAUNDERS' *TENTH OF DECEMBER*

An Essay Submitted to the
Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts & Sciences of
John Carroll University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Arts

By
Patrick E. Gallagher
2015

Introduction

The American short story is one of the most cherished components of our young nation's history and identity. Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and O. Henry helped cultivate this literary form that derives from one of the world's oldest storytelling techniques, oral story telling. Today, Poe continues to frighten his readers with his horrific tales of human frailty; Hawthorne provides a window into our country's early historical narrative; O. Henry woos us with his stories' heart and warmth.

Even though the global community has come to embrace the short story form as well, the short story is unequivocally a piece of the American identity. Martin Greenup, professor of English at Harvard, explains American affinity for the short story, "Yet so strong is the enduring importance of the short story in American literature that scholars have been keen to champion it as a national invention, noting its differences from earlier types of succinct narrative such as folktales and fairy stories, and setting it apart from the short story in other literatures" (251). In a February 2013 article for *Esquire*, Benjamin Percy writes, "A short story demands strenuous attention, supplying only the most essential components of character and narrative, asking the reader to infer the rest" (30). We can extract this from both Greenup's and Percy's comments: the short is an undeniably essential literary form because of the way in which it adeptly uses brevity and concision to attract and provoke its reader in a way that other literary forms do not.

While Poe, Hawthorne, and O. Henry have secured their places in the American literary canon as masters of the short story, the 21st century brings to Americans a new and important short story visionary, George Saunders. Rodney Clapp, in his article "Empathy in Satire," writes, "Saunders' earliest characters constantly struggle in a world

longing for fantasy but marked by brutal economic realities” (45). Aaron Thier, in his article “The Strange Arcane,” points out that Saunders’ characters “...have inherited a hopefulness, an idea of themselves and their country and their shinier futures, that is no longer applicable” (40). Saunders’ biting satirical portraits of contemporary American society, a place paralyzed by its obsession with flashy objects and instant gratification, rouses memories of a similarly acerbic satirist of the early 20th century.

James Aloysius Stanislaus Joyce, called “Jimmy” by his friends, spent the better half of two decades writing and revising his most famous collection of short stories, *Dubliners*. Joyce is a reminder that the short story form is not uniquely beloved by Americans even though we may claim it as our progeny. While Saunders and Joyce occupy two distinctly opposite geographic locations and historical periods—Saunders a dreamlike 21st century United States and Joyce a decrepit and decaying modern Dublin—both writers focus their attention on studying the paralysis experienced by people suffering from social, economic, and spiritual oppression.

George Saunders’ short fiction provides an appropriate satirical lens through which the 21st century American identity can be dissected in the same way that James Joyce compelled his earliest readers to re-examine the broken Irish identity. Saunders creative spirit, sparked many years ago, is alive and well, itself identifiably American. Saunders, in his essay “On Process,” published for *Kenyon Review*, writes, “I think of fiction, at its highest level, as a form of prayer, or spiritual calisthenics. Most of us at a certain point in our lives, come to understand that we are here *to grow*. To grow in love, patience, gentleness; to become more able to deal with the harshness and victories of life with aplomb and generosity” (6). Most recently Saunders’ artistry has

manifest itself in *Tenth of December* (2013), a collection of ten short stories, each with at least one character who finds himself or herself paralyzed by the unrealistic expectations of an American society that has lost track of its identity.

Joyce, one of the most prolific and audacious authors of the 20th century, cut the course for the type of modern short story telling that Saunders has mastered. Joyce himself dealt with nearly identical issues in *Dubliners*, considered his most accessible and well-known short story collection. Published in 1914, after an overwhelming battle with printers over the collection's controversial content, *Dubliners* is still viewed by contemporary literary scholars as one of the finest accomplishments of short story writing from the early 20th century. One might wonder how Saunders, an American living in the world of global terrorism and the Internet of Things, and Joyce, an Irish literary pioneer, can be brought up in the same breath.

What coalesces these authors from two different centuries and two different countries is a common theme that Joyce saw infecting Dublin in his early life: paralysis and decay. Joyce highlights the decaying status of Dublin as a result of a centuries-long British oppression that kept Dublin, and the rest of Ireland for that matter, captive and devoid of a distinctly Irish identity. In a similar way, Saunders' fiction paints a portrait of a decaying American identity. Contrastingly, The United States about which Saunders is writing is not paralyzed and decaying because of a national oppressor as Joyce was writing about Ireland. Instead the paralyzing agent is a growing lack of empathy, a confounding commitment to commercialism, and a demoralizing lack of faith in the human spirit.

My goal in my research and writing is to illustrate and analyze the relationship between Joyce's *Dubliners* and Saunders' *Tenth of December* in order to show that both collections portray the human desire to escape the oppressive factors that all nationalities and generations must work to overcome, and to show that both authors' works prove that growth (emotional, physical, and spiritual) is the most essential component of the human experience. In order to accomplish my goal, I will rely on the literary principle of intertextuality, the concept that one can use literature as a mechanism to interpret and connect other literary works.

Getting it all started: "Victory Lap" and "The Sisters"

As a reader, one can easily take for granted the thought and strategy an author of short stories puts into the collection's premier tale. The first story in any collection of short stories is the author's opportunity to establish theme, tone, and atmosphere for the rest of the collection. In this way both Joyce and Saunders make their collections feel less like short story collections and more like novels. The nature of the short story collection being as it is does not mandate that the stories in any given collection be unified in any manner. The fact the both *Tenth of December* and *Dubliners* do establish unity from the collections' onsets is the first piece of evidence proving the connection between the two.

Joyce begins *Dubliners* by giving the reader explicit clues, if one can even call them clues because of his unusual directness, regarding the collection's thematic content. "The Sisters," *Dubliners*' opening tale of a young, nameless, Irish boy dealing with the loss of his beloved friend and mentor, Fr. Flynn, is the perfect opening story. The unnamed narrator says, "Every night as I gazed up at the window I said softly to myself

the word *paralysis*” (Joyce 1). This young Joycean narrator provides readers with the major connecting piece—paralysis— for the entire collection that is ingrained in each of *Dubliners*’ fourteen stories, painting a portrait of early 20th century Dublin and its citizenry.

To further illuminate this point one only needs to examine further the narrative content of the “The Sisters.” Joyce begins, “There was no hope for him this time: it was the third stroke” (1). While readers soon learn that the third person personal pronoun “him” belongs to the deceased Fr. Flynn, Joyce opens the collection with a characteristic degree of ambiguity in order to express the boy’s familiarity with Fr. Flynn. Joyce illustrates the closeness of the two in a number of personal thoughts from the boy: “He had often said to me: *I am not long for this world*, and I had thought his words idle. Now I knew they were very true” (1). The whole first story deals with death, the eternal paralysis, and the boy’s shattering realization that the Dublin that he knows is the not the Dublin that others know.

Those who wish to oppose my argument by saying that one instance does not constitute a trend would certainly stand on valid ground; however, the citizens’ and city’s paralysis is reiterated in each of the following thirteen stories, culminating in the collection’s finest tale, “The Dead.” Therefore, Joyce structures *Dubliners* by design: he leads his readers on an unforgettable journey not only through one of the world’s most famous cities, but on a journey through the uncertainty of childhood, the pain of adolescence, the disappointment of adulthood’s abandoned dreams, ending in a crescendo with “The Dead.”

In a similar way George Saunders uses the first short story in his collection *Tenth of December* to establish the thematic content for his collection. Saunders begins his journey into his pseudorealistic dream world with “Victory Lap.” Immediately, the vapid and self-centered dialogue of the story’s young female narrator, Alison Pope, strikes readers. Her concerns, however, are Saunders’ attempt to qualify and legitimize her voice, the voice of the privileged 21st century American adolescent, whose life is full of sterility. While the nameless narrator of “The Sisters” and Alison share more differences than similarities, the authors intents are equivalent. Saunders captures the myopic attitude of a female adolescent living in an American fantasy:

Say the staircase was marble. Say she descended and all heads turned.

Where was {special one}? Approaching now, bowing slightly, he

exclaimed, How can so much grace be contained in one small package?

Oops. Had he said *small package*? And just stood there? Broad princelike

face totally bland of expression? Poor thing! Sorry, no way, down he

went, he was definitely not {special one}. (3)

In Saunders’ early characterization of Alison, readers are welcomed into the dream world that Saunders has created. “Victory Lap” is the perfect introduction to *Tenth of December* because of the way Saunders is able to blend Alison’s adolescent fantasy with the nightmare she experiences as the story progresses. Alison is clearly one of the lucky ones, at first, in Saunders’ world even though she lacks a complete understanding of life’s realities:

Although actually she loved Ms. C. So strict! Also loved the other girls in class. And the girls from school. *Loved* them. Everyone was so nice. Plus

the boys at her school. Plus the teachers at her school. All of them were doing their best. Actually, she loved her whole town. That adorable grocer, spraying his lettuce! Pastor Carol, with her large comfortable butt! The chubby postman, gesticulating with his padded envelopes! It had once been a mill town. Wasn't that crazy? What did that even mean? (5)

Alison's one-dimensional worldview is made even clearer as she spews on about her perfect life and love for everything:

Also she loved her house. Across the creek was the Russian church. So ethnic! That onion dome had loomed in her window since her Pooh footie days. Also loved Gladsong Drive. Every house on Gladsong was a Corona del Mar. That was amazing! If you had a friend on Gladsong, you already knew where everything was in his or her home. (5)

By examining Saunders diction, readers become more fully aware of Alison's picturesque American life; it is this same American Dream that has put so many real Americans into a dreamlike state of living. By showing her excitement over the "ethnic" church across from which she lives, Alison proves that her world view is based in naiveté and stereotype. While Alison shows excitement over the Russian church's facility, she lacks any real understanding of the church as an institution. Saunders further shows Alison's detachment by placing the church across a creek. Even though a creek is an easily traversable waterway, the simple physical separation is the key here. The waterway is a barrier, one that Alison could certainly cross if she felt the need to leave her dreamlike existence. But Alison is only interested in the church's appearance. Her

street name, Gladson Drive, suggests Alison's life is a veritable utopia, where every house looks the same (the Corona del Mar model) inside and out.

Unlike Joyce, Saunders is not as quick or explicit with his setting of the collection's stage. While it is certainly a dark and fantastical version of the United States, Saunders chooses to construct more subtle expositions and settings for his stories. In fact Saunders switches narrative perspectives two times before readers are made fully aware of the fate that awaits Alison. The second perspective comes from Kyle Boots, Alison's peer who lives under the despotism of his helicopter parents:

Hey, today was Tuesday, a Major Treat day. The five (5) new Work Points for placing the geode, plus his existing two (2) Work Points, totaled seven (7) Work Points, which, added to his eight (8) accrued Usual Chore Points, made fifteen (15) Total Treat Points, which could garner him a Major Treat (for example, two handfuls of yogurt-covered raisins) plus twenty free-choice TV minutes, although the particular show would have to be negotiated with Dad at time of cash-in. (Saunders 13)

Kyle, who has a penchant for unarticulated profanity, helps establish a different aspect of the fantasy world that Alison and he occupy: the ethnocentrism and classism of the upper middle class. Upon first reading it might seem odd that Saunders switches perspectives so quickly into the collection's first story, but the reader comes to comprehend the switch when he or she becomes better acquainted with Kyle and his intolerant and condescending attitude. While looking out the window Kyle notices, "A guy got out of the van. One of the usual Rooskies. 'Rooskie' was an allowed slang. Also 'dang it.' Also 'holy golly.' Also 'crapper.' The Rooskie was wearing a jean jacket over a hoodie,

which, in Kyle's experience was not unusual church-wear for the Rooskies, who sometimes came directly over from Jiffy Lube still wearing coveralls" (Saunders 15). Not only does Kyle's use of the derogatory term for a person of Russian ethnicity show us his intolerant attitude, it exposes the more dangerous fact the "Rooskie" is one of the approved slang words in the Boots household. While Alison's fantastical reality exposes her love for literally everything, Kyle's is defined by his classist and ethnocentric point-of-view.

Through the third narrative perspective, we see how Saunders is bringing this all together, setting the course for the rest of the collection in the same way Joyce does in *Dubliners*. The man whom Kyle is cautiously watching eventually kidnaps Alison, shattering the fantasy world she once occupied like a rock through a window. The mind of the kidnapper can only be described as demented as Saunders transports readers into the kidnapper's mind:

If fuckwise it went bad, she didn't properly arouse him, he'd abort the activity, truncate the subject, heave the thing out, clean van as necessary, go buy corn, return van to Kenny, say Hey, bro, here's a shitload of corn, thanks for the van, I never could've bought a suitable quantity of corn in my car. Then lay low, watch the papers like he'd done with the nonarousing redhead out in— (Saunders 20)

This horrific scene is the defining moment in "Victory Lap" because Alison, a vivacious dreamer, is moments away from being raped and murdered, signaling for the reader the reality that before this moment Alison was blissfully ignorant of the life's brutal realities. This is the exact reality that Saunders is referring to in his aforementioned essay for

Kenyon Review. Significant is the fact that the kidnapper makes it a point to note “Here was the creek. He marched her through” (Saunders 19). Symbolically, Alison has been carried over the threshold into a new reality where her dreams and love for everything are overshadowed by a darker and grittier environment, a reality where young girls like her are kidnapped, raped, and murdered.

In similar ways Joyce and Saunders begin their important collections by refuting one reality and replacing it with another. The realities experienced by Joyce’s and Saunders’ characters are certainly characterized by the cruelty of lived experience. For instance in “The Sisters,” the protagonist thinks very highly of Fr. Flynn until he hears Old Cotter, the boy’s uncle’s friend, malign him. Old Cotter says “-No, I wouldn’t say he was exactly...but there was something queer ...there was something uncanny about him. I’ll tell you my opinion...” (Joyce 1-2). The boy is obviously troubled by Cotter’s words: “He began to puff at his pipe, no doubt arranging his opinion in his mind. Tiresome old fool! When we knew him first he used to be rather interesting, talking of faints and worms; but I soon grew tired of him and his endless stories about the distillery” (Joyce 2). The boy’s distaste for Old Cotter definitely has to do with Old Cotter’s negative opinion of Fr. Flynn, a priest the boy admires very much. Things do not get any better for the boy when his uncle chimes in: “-That’s my principle, too, said my uncle. Let him learn to box his corner. That’s what I’m always saying to that Rosicrucian there: take exercise. Why, when I was a nipper every morning of my life I had a cold bath, winter and summer. And that’s what stands to me now. Education is all very fine and large...” (Joyce 3). The boy is seen once more holding his tongue out of polite deference to his elders: “I crammed my mouth with stirabout for fear I might give utterance to my anger.

Tiresome old red-nosed imbecile!” (Joyce 3). And who could blame the boy for feeling so injured by his uncle and Old Cotter? While the reality of youth battles the reality of adulthood, the greatest casualty is the boy’s loss of pride. He spent hours with Fr. Flynn learning Latin, the elements of the Catholic Mass, and world history only to hear from the only other male characters in the story that the man who was his mentor was not viewed positively by others. This ultimate realization, or epiphany, unceremoniously ends the experience of childhood for the boy and provides him his first experience of the cynical reality of adulthood.

Saunders does much of the same with Alison and Kyle in “Victory Lap.” The story’s title certainly has a positive connotation, ultimately lulling the reader into the same false sense of security that Alison grips so tightly early on. Alison, and even Kyle to an extent, would be fine living in their overprotected existence for as long as they could because it safeguards their security. Alison, however, slowly begins to recognize, to some degree at least, that the life she is living lacks depth. The narrator observes, “There was so much she didn’t know! Like how to change the oil. Or even check the oil. How to open the hood. How to bake brownies. That was embarrassing, actually, being a girl and all. And what was a mortgage? Did it come with the house? When you breast-fed, did you have to like push the milk out?” (Saunders 7). Alison’s internal monologue is characteristic of her own version of the child’s reality that her counterpart in “The Sisters” experiences. The only difference between her reality and the boy’s reality from “The Sisters” is that Alison’s childhood reality is based in affluence, overprotection, and stereotype. Here, intertextuality assists readers in better understanding the truth present: the death of naiveté is a universal and culminating characteristic of the childhood

experience. Alison does not know how to check the oil because she has someone who presumably will do that for her: Dad. Even the activity that she is embarrassed by not knowing how to do—baking brownies—is something that someone most likely does for her; in this case it is probably a nanny or her mother.

Alison, in love with all aspects of her cozy little life, is unaware of the dangers that await her prior to her kidnapping. Her understanding of the world is so superficial that she fails to recognize anything about her town and its inhabitants beyond what lies on the surface. This type of self-absorption is an appropriate place for Saunders' collection to begin. Alison, who is so full of fantasies about what awaits her in life, is brutally roused from her picture-perfect existence and realizes the reality of life in order to pull readers into the representation of America that Saunders has created. At the same time, Saunders makes Alison's experience all the more real for his audience using his version of stream-of-consciousness, a style that Joyce mastered and made popular. Saunders, in a February 2013 interview with Diane Rehm, had this to say about Alison's thought process:

This is just a kind of internal monologue from the point of view of this 15-year-old girl. And I do a thing that I call a third-person ventriloquist or it's kind of traditional stream of consciousness except you're constrained by that person's diction and thought pattern. So you quickly go from sort of outside into her way of thinking and things. So here she's just waiting for her mother to pick her up for a ballet recital and she's sort of just thinking about a few things that are important to her. (Rehm)

This third-person ventriloquism is a technique that Saunders uses adeptly; however, this technique owes much of its popularity to James Joyce and *Dubliners*, exhibited in a number of the collection's stories, including "The Sisters." Joyce is able to use this same stream-of-consciousness technique throughout the entirety of his collection, but brings it to its finest form in "The Dead," to which I will devote time later in this essay.

While it is violent and troubling, the only chance Alison has to be saved from this world plagued by her own fantasy and ignorance is her kidnapping. The reader gains an interesting perspective when looking at this same physical world through the eyes of the kidnapper. Plagued by poverty and his own misogyny, the kidnapper ushers Alison into his reality by forcing her to cross the stream, an experience representative of the human struggle to experience the world of those who are unlike us. This is not to say that what the kidnapper does has any valiant or moral purpose. Even still, there is a clear emphasis on Alison's obdurate and perseverant attitude juxtaposed with the kidnapper's irreverent and sadistic one: "Little bitch was turned around now, looking back at the house. That willfulness wouldn't stand. That was going to get nipped in the bud. He'd have to remember to hurt her early, establish a baseline" (Saunders 20). Although it is a simple illustration, it is important to focus on Alison's "looking back at the house" (Saunders 20) as she is marched through unknown territory. Her Corona del Mar home is a symbol of safety. Having Alison stare at it as she walks to what the reader can only presume to be Alison's rape and murder shifts the story's tone, jolting the reader from his or her own initial comfort established by Alison's fantasy world.

And this is what is most important about "The Sisters" and "Victory Lap": Both Saunders and Joyce waste no time informing their readers that the worlds that they are

representing are not pretty places. Both stories are about the death of dreams, and both collections carry this theme throughout their remaining pages. In the introduction to *Collaborative Dubliners: Joyce in Dialogue* Vicki Mahaffey and Jill Shashaty note, “Like miniature time capsules, the ‘tales’ contain clues that offer interpreters of the future a means of understanding what an older generation learned to see” (2). Students of George Saunders could surely agree that *Tenth of December* does the exact same thing, but Saunders has incorporated clues for students of the present to study their contemporary reality. Again, we are able to see the blatant evidence of intertextuality at play. Interestingly enough, all protagonists in *Dubliners* and *Tenth of December* believe to some degree that they have little if any control over the things that are happening to them.

How it all ends: Fatalism and Resurrection in “The Dead” and “Tenth of December”

A main focus of this essay, thus far, has been on how Joyce and Saunders use their opening stories to set the tone for the rest of their collections. Most importantly, though, time must also be spent attending to how both authors end their collections. As a note of recognition: there is much to be said about analyzing the middle sections of both collections in order to strengthen my argument, but I have chosen to devote my attention in this essay away from the middle stories because of the sheer scope that project would entail.

Joyce’s “The Dead” is considered by many literary scholars to be the finest short story written in the English language. Those who disagree do so mainly on a technicality: because “The Dead” is a longer story—53 pages in the edition I have used

for my research—many classify it as a novella. Nevertheless, Joyce perfects his storytelling in this tale of love, loss, and reflection. Readers find themselves at the Misses Morkan’s annual dance on January 6th, the Feast of the Epiphany. This yearly party brings together the sisters’ friends, family, and music students for a night of dancing, singing, feasting, and storytelling. Considered the traditional protagonist is Gabriel Conroy, the nephew of the Misses Morkan, who serves as the most important figure in the story’s resolution. Wallace Gray, a renowned Joycean scholar, notes that the story’s title most likely comes from a poem in Thomas Moore’s book of poetry *Irish Melodies*, a book that Gray calls “one of the most popular and well known books of poetry at the time...” (1). The poem begins:

Oh, ye Dead! Oh, ye Dead! whom we know by the light you give
From your cold gleaming eyes, though you move like men who live.

The story has a number of conflicts, but none is more important than the internal conflict Gabriel experiences near the story’s end. Along the way, though, Gabriel encounters smaller external conflicts that give readers an idea of who Gabriel really is, but are less significant to me and the connections and conclusions I am hoping to reveal.

It would be nearly impossible to analyze each of the symbols Joyce uses in “The Dead,” so I will attempt to address a few in order to help the reader better understand the importance of this final story in *Dubliners*, as well as build the foundation for the connection I will make between “The Dead” and the ultimate story in *Tenth of December*. Joyce wastes no time in throwing a symbol rich with meaning into the mix. He begins “Lily, the caretaker’s daughter, was literally run off her feet. Hardly had she brought one gentleman into the little pantry behind the office on the ground floor and helped him off

with his overcoat than the wheezy hall doorbell clanged again and she had to scamper along the bare hallway to let in another guest” (Joyce 183). A little research reveals that the first symbol of “The Dead” is the caretaker’s daughter, Lily, and her role at the party. Gray identifies and parenthetically explains the symbolism embedded in Lily’s name, “In choosing this name Joyce wants the reader to make the associations that the flower has with: 1) death (it’s frequently used at funerals); 2) the Archangel Gabriel (it is symbolic of this guardian of the gates of death); and 3) Easter, and thus with rebirth” (1). Immediately in the opening line of the collection’s ultimate story, Joyce coaxes the seasoned reader to begin thinking.

The funerary imagery is especially apparent given the story’s title. Lily’s role, answering the door and assisting guests into the party, provides for the Biblical allusion to the Archangel Gabriel who diligently guards death’s gates, not to mention that Gabriel is the namesake of the story’s protagonist. These two representations seem fairly straightforward; however, the third, the bit dealing with the idea of resurrection, provides for some idiosyncratic Joycean ambiguity. As a father of the modern literary movement, it is this sort of ambiguity upon which Joyce’s fiction especially thrived. The clues are littered throughout “The Dead,” but the true meaning is murkier than it is clear.

Gabriel Conroy is dead inside because his life is based in pretense and lost opportunity. Like many of the other tragic characters in *Dubliners*, Gabriel has a fascination with the Continent—the popular moniker for continental Europe used by many of Joyce’s Dubliners—and a disdain for Ireland. So, too, like Joyce’s other tragic Dubliners, Gabriel maintains an animosity towards Ireland based on his belief that the place is plagued by paralysis, one of the collection’s key themes established in “The

Sisters.” Gabriel’s belief in this paralysis is one of the most autobiographical parts of the entire collection as Joyce himself maintained that Dublin was a stagnant place, motivating him to explore the Continent at a young age.

To accentuate Gabriel’s lack of life, Joyce weaves in another subtle yet powerful symbol, snow. While many might believe that snow is common in Ireland, it is actually to the contrary. Snow is mentioned nearly two dozen times in the story’s 53 pages. In a country where snow is not the type of precipitation that citizens normally experience, even during the months of January and February, Joyce’s emphasis on the snow fallen and falling brings to mind winter, the season symbolic of death. While the fall season is the span of time when the dying begins, typically emblematic of a person’s maturation, winter is the season that allows nothing new to grow. The snow, like death itself, is unassuming, quiet, and cold. The first mention of the snow appears as follows: “A light fringe of snow lay like a cape on the shoulders of his overcoat and like toecaps on the toes of his galoshes; and, as the buttons of his overcoat slipped with a squeaking noise through the snow-stiffened frieze, a cold fragrant air from out-of-doors escaped from crevices and folds” (Joyce 185). In this moment the reader watches Gabriel enter the party, lightly touched by the snow that symbolizes his own spiritual and eventual physical death.

Gabriel is a man who wears many layers, yet snow consumes him from head to toe. Joyce alludes to Gabriel’s desire to be with death a number of times in the story as well. In one particular moment, when Mrs. Malins, the mother of the drunkard Freddy Malins, is pontificating about Scotland Gabriel completely ignores her, resorting instead to an isolationist’s fantasy:

Gabriel's warm trembling fingers tapped the cold pane of the window. How cool it must be outside! How pleasant it would be to walk out alone, first along by the river and then through the park! The snow would be lying on the branches of the trees and forming a bright cap on the top of the Wellington Monument. How much more pleasant it would be than at the supper-table! (Joyce 201)

This narration proves to be one of the most telling moments in all of *Dubliners*. For the majority of Joyce's other protagonists, the end goal they seek is life. The young boy in "An Encounter" "wants real adventures to happen" to himself (Joyce 14); Eveline in the story with which she shares her name believes that her fiancé, Frank, will "give her life, perhaps, love, too" (Joyce 35); Maria, the protagonist in "Clay" thinks "how much better it was to be independent and to have your own money in your pocket" (Joyce 101). Gabriel is unlike his fellow protagonists. He seeks isolation, and, ultimately, the feeling of death, whereas his counterparts spend the majority of their tales seeking life. While they all ultimately fail to find the life they seek, they at least show glimpses of the living spirit. One gets the sense from Gabriel that his life has been so plagued by disappointment that he can only find fulfillment in isolation.

Gabriel's epiphany is undoubtedly the most poignant moment of the whole collection. But before one can accurately analyze Gabriel's grand moment of realization, one must first look at the closing moments of the Morkan sisters' party. While Gabriel begins to collect his belongings he witnesses a scene that begins to bring everything together for him:

Gabriel had not gone to the door with the others. He was in a dark part of the hall gazing up the staircase. A woman was standing near the top of the first flight, in the shadow, also. He could not see her face but he could see the terracotta and salmonpink panels of her skirt which the shadow made appear black and white. It was his wife. She was leaning on the banisters, listening to something. Gabriel was surprised at her stillness and strained his ear to listen also. But he could hear little save the noise of laughter and dispute on the front steps, a few chords struck the piano and a few notes of a man's voice singing. (Joyce 221)

This extended description denotes the overwhelming balance of light and shadow imagery, but more importantly it illustrates Gabriel's desire to know what it is that has his wife so captivated. The shadow that graces her dress can only signify that which Gabriel does not know about his wife, Gretta.

Joyce continues to illustrate this important moment without revealing Gretta's thoughts. Instead, Joyce chooses to focus on Gabriel's observation:

He stood still in the gloom of the hall, trying to catch the air that the voice was singing and gazing up at his wife. There was grace and mystery in her attitude as if she were a symbol of something. He asked himself what is a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow, listening to a distant music, a symbol of. If he were a painter he would paint her in that attitude. Her blue felt hat would show the bronze of her hair against the darkness and the dark panels of her skirt would show off the light ones. *Distant Music* he would call the picture if he were a painter. (221)

Gabriel's observation notes that what he sees in Gretta at this moment is "grace and mystery." While he "asked himself what is a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow, listening to a distant music, a symbol of" without designating any real answer, readers should see the answer in Gabriel's observation. Gretta symbolizes what Gabriel sees, grace and mystery. Why then does he not realize this immediately? Most likely because he has failed to recognize Gretta's grace and mystery for the entirety of their relationship.

Eventually by the story's end, Gabriel seems to have a better understanding of his wife; however, the overwhelming moment continues:

Gabriel said nothing but pointed up the stairs towards where his wife was standing. Now that the hall door was closed the voice and the piano could be heard more clearly. Gabriel held up his hand for them to be silent. The song seemed to be in the old Irish tonality and the singer seemed uncertain both of his words and of his voice. The voice, made plaintive by distance and by the singer's hoarseness, faintly illuminated the cadence of the air with the words expressing grief:

O, the rain falls on my heavy locks

And the dew wets my skin,

My babe lies cold...(Joyce 221)

The reader's ability to infer at this point in "The Dead" becomes significantly more important. As Joyce positions Gabriel below Gretta, alert and fixated on her stillness, the reader becomes aware of the power of the song being sung, "The Lass of Aughrim." Even though Gretta later reveals to Gabriel why that particular song paralyzes her, the

reader only needs to look at the third line that Joyce includes. The song is about love lost in death. While Gretta is temporarily physically paralyzed, her heart is eternally paralyzed, and it is because of Gretta's emotional paralysis that Gabriel comes to the most troubling realization of his life.

Gabriel Conroy is a man who has lived his life without love. Gretta on the other hand reveals to Gabriel the nature of her paralysis upon returning to their hotel following the party. Gretta begins to sob inside the room and confesses that she believes that the young man of whom she thinks when she hears that song, Michael Furey, "died for me" (Joyce 232). Gretta tells Gabriel the heart-wrenching story unprovoked by her husband:

Then the night before I left I was in my grandmother's house in Nuns' Island, packing up, and I heard gravel thrown up against the window. The window was so wet I couldn't see so I ran downstairs as I was and slipped out the back into the garden and there was the poor fellow at the end of the garden shivering. (Joyce 233)

This moment, packed full of the type of melodrama found in a contemporary romance film, draws a stark contrast between Gretta's long-lost love, Michael, and her husband, Gabriel. Gray notes the differences in Michael and Gabriel using a religious lens: "The name Gabriel, in Hebrew, means 'man of God'—in tradition, an angel of death but also, as in Milton's *Paradise Lost* (IV) one of the guards of heaven, Gabriel is considered to be a comfort to man, whereas his counterpart, Michael (whose namesake appears at the end of the story) is the church militant; the name Michael in Hebrew translates "who is like God" (4). The etymology of the two names aids in characterizing both Gabriel and

Michael as men: Gabriel, like his archangel counterpart, is a guard who brings comfort to his wife, but little else. Michael, conversely, was a man of action and passion.

Realizing the vast difference between Michael and him, Gabriel understands that the chance to live a life full of purpose and love has passed. As Gretta sleeps Gabriel laments his life's failure:

Generous tears filled Gabriel's eyes. He had never felt like that himself towards any woman but he knew that such a feeling must be love. The tears gathered more thickly in his eyes and in the partial darkness he imagined he saw the form of a young man standing under a dripping tree. Other forms were near. His soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead. He was conscious of, but could not apprehend, their wayward and flickering existence. His own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world: the solid world itself which these dead had one time reared and lived in was discovering and dwindling. (Joyce 235)

Gabriel's imagining the worlds of the dead and living touching brings him closer to his epiphany that his own life has been nothing but a "flickering existence," and, that like the ghosts he, too, is closer than ever to fading away from the physical realm without much commotion. This moment is full of ambiguity regarding Gabriel's fate, and like much of Joyce's fiction, must be left to individual interpretation. Gray comments that "The final paragraph is generally conceded to be one of the finest, most moving, and beautiful in twentieth-century fiction; it is also one of the most ambiguous" (34). The ambiguity of which Gray speaks surrounds the question that is posed by all who study "The Dead": does Gabriel's epiphany lead him to any type of resurrection?

I would like to argue using Gray as my foundation that Gabriel lacks a resurrection in his marriage with Gretta, but he is not refused a spiritual one.

Gray writes:

Gabriel is described as watching 'sleepily,' and in western literature there is traditionally a close connection between sleep and death. We have seen in the preceding paragraphs that Gabriel is being visited by the shades of the dead, and the implication is that, because of the events of this night, he has come to realize not only that he is a ridiculous figure, but that he has never known what true love is, and, moreover, that Gretta felt more for someone in her earlier life than she has for him. (34)

Considering the tragic manner in which Michael Furey died, along with the romantic manner in which Gretta remembers him, it is all but impossible for Gabriel to become as fascinating of a figure as Michael.

Conversely, Joyce uses Gabriel's epiphany that only a thin veil separates the worlds of the living and the dead to suggest that Gabriel, like Joyce himself and all of Ireland, is at a crossroads. In this moment Joyce uses the third-person ventriloquism that Saunders later perfected:

A few light taps upon the pane made him turn to the window. It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It 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. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furrey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. 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. (Joyce 236)

There are sharp hints of disappointment, pain, regret, and hopelessness laced throughout this final internal monologue. The snow, *the* symbol of an all-encompassing death, now blankets everything that Gabriel can name. Gabriel even admits, “The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward,” a clause that intimates Gabriel’s ultimate acknowledgment that his own physical death is imminent; however, in this same paragraph, the snow blankets “crooked crosses and headstones” and “barren thorns.” These are undeniably Christian symbols used to imply that all Christian believers have the same opportunity for spiritual resurrection, even though the physical being dies.

More likely than not Joyce decided that this final moment was too difficult for him to define. Gray sees this final paragraph full of problems for the reader to consider including: “...the image of snow...” (34), leading him to wonder “Does it represent death, is all Ireland covered by the spirit of the dead, is there no physical or spiritual fire in Ireland?” (34). The answer that Joyce seems to illustrate throughout the entire collection is a resounding “yes.” *Dubliners* is littered with protagonists and supporting characters who are dead both physically and/or spiritually. While Fr. Flynn lies physically dead, his young friend’s childish spirit is killed by the critical words of his

uncle; while Eveline's mother is physically dead, Eveline's spirit is killed when she abandons her chance at freedom; while Michael Furrey lies physically dead, Gabriel realizes his own spiritual expiration.

This does not mean, however, that a spiritual resurrection, as alluded to in "The Dead" is out of reach for any of Joyce's characters, especially Gabriel. "The Dead" teaches readers many lessons, but none is more important than this for the spiritually inclined: life's disappointments, its struggles, its tragedies are isolated to the physical world. Again intertextuality shows us that Saunders' essay "On Process" highlights the difficulties encountered by *Dubliners*' characters. While Joyce was not necessarily positively inspired by the Catholic Church, John Wyse Jackson and Bernard McGinley write in their introduction to *James Joyce's Dubliners: An Illustrated Edition with Annotations* that "Joyce was a child of the Jesuits, and although he was to reject Catholicism as a religion, he never entirely ceased to be influenced by their values and methods" (viii). With Jackson's and McGinley's comment in mind, it is completely plausible that what Joyce leaves readers with at the end of *Dubliners* is their own spiritual enigma to solve: will our own epiphanies lead us to a better position as we the living become the dead?

"Tenth of December," the last story in Saunders' collection of the same name, serves as the perfect companion piece to "The Dead," but Saunders leaves little, if any, ambiguity regarding spiritual and physical resurrection. Saunders' collection's ultimate story begins much like "Victory Lap," inside the mind of a child and ends much like "The Dead" inside the mind of a decaying man. In this case the child is Robin, described as a "pale boy with unfortunate Prince Valiant bangs and cublike mannerisms..."

(Saunders 215). Robin is an outcast who spends most of his time imagining he is on a mission to defeat the Nethers, a group of human-beaver hybrids who have kidnapped Suzanne Bledsoe, Robin's damsel-in-distress. Robin is another of Saunders' characters who is battered down by the world of the living, and he projects his bullied status at school through the creation of the Nethers: "Sometimes, believing it their coup de grace, not realizing he'd heard this since time in memorial from certain in-school cretins, they'd go, Wow, we didn't even know Robin could be a boy's name" (Saunders 217).

Immediately, the reader feels a strong affinity for Robin because Saunders has expertly crafted characters in *Tenth of December* deserving of our empathy. Saunders, like Joyce, understands and communicates the pain and struggle of the human experience. But, "Tenth of December" is not really about Robin. This is Don Eber's tale.

Eber, as the narrator refers to him, is 53, suffering from terminal brain cancer, and ready to end it all by freezing to death near a local pond on what is a frigid tenth day in December. Eber is decaying physically and mentally; Saunders uses his third person ventriloquism again to show just how bad Eber's brain cancer is: "Not so once the suffering began. Began. God damn it. More and more his words. Askew. More and more his words were not what he would hoped. Hope" (Saunders 223). Like Gabriel in Joyce's "The Dead," Eber finds himself in a state of decay. Eber, though, is aware of both his physical and spiritual decay from the moment readers meet him, whereas Gabriel is unaware, or more tragically in denial, of his decay until near the end of the story. Eber spends the majority of his story in an internal monologue recalling his absentee father, his stepfather's tragic suffering at brain cancer's hands, and the things that he will never be able to accomplish:

Now he'd never deliver his major national speech on compassion. What about going down the Mississippi in a canoe? What about living in an A-frame near a shady creek with the two hippie girls he'd met in 1968 in that souvenir shop in the Ozarks, when Allen, his stepfather, wearing those crazy aviators, had brought him a bag of fossil rocks? (Saunders 222-223)

Eber's end-of-life reflection of "What abouts?" parallels Gabriel's moment of reflection at the window. Both characters are deep in thought and heartbroken over the dreams that will never become realities, and both men have come to realize that they are sad creatures who, like all of the living, exist temporarily in the physical world. But because of Joyce's ambiguity it is difficult to conclude whether or not both characters share the acceptance of the end of their physical lives. Readers know that this is true for Eber, but as I mentioned earlier, what Gabriel's journey west means is less apparent, even though it is symbolic of death in Western literature. However, one cannot dismiss that the setting of "Tenth of December" is during the middle of Advent, the first season in the Christian faith's calendar signaling the coming of Christ, and that the ground upon which Eber and Robin travel is snow covered. While Saunders mentions the cold and the snow, it seems that the snow is dually symbolic of the physical death that awaits Eber as well as of the beginning of a new life for him made clear by the story's conclusion.

Eber's epiphany is a result of his saving Robin from, ironically enough, freezing to death after falling into the pond near where Eber was planning on freezing to death himself. Robin, acting out his fantastical heroic battle against the Nethers, shifts his mission to saving Eber when he sees that the old man has left his coat sitting on a nearby

bench, but Robin falls through the ice and provides Eber the opportunity to do something great:

Suddenly he was not purely the dying guy who woke nights in the med bed thinking, Make this not true make this not true, but again, partly, the guy who used to put bananas in the freezer, then crack them on the counter and pour chocolate over the broken chunks, the guy who'd once stood outside a classroom window in a rainstorm to see how Jodi was faring with that little red-headed shit who wouldn't give her a chance at the book table, the guy who used to hand-paint birdfeeders in college and sell them on weekends in Boulder, wearing a jester hat and doing a little juggling routine he'd— (Saunders 234)

Robin's fall through the ice ignites Eber's senses of purpose and human compassion. Eber certainly could have continued on his way, acting as if he did not notice the flailing boy near drowning in the frigid pond, but instead he chooses to save him, and by saving Robin Eber comes to recognize that his life, even though it is fraught with suffering and struggle, is a life that is worth living until its natural end.

Consequentially, Eber's epiphany feels characteristically different from Gabriel's at the end of "The Dead," but it is this characteristic difference that provides readers with the ultimate example of intertextuality between Saunders and Joyce. Eber delivers this simple yet profound statement:

Because, okay, the thing was—he saw it now, was starting to see it—if some guy, at the end, fell apart, and said or did bad things, or had to be helped, helped to quite a considerable extent? So what? What of it? Why

should he not do or say weird things or look strange or disgusting? Why should the shit not run down his legs? Why should those he loved not lift and bend and feed and wipe him, when he would gladly do the same for them? He'd been afraid to be lessened by the lifting and bending and feeding and wiping, and was still afraid of that, and yet, at the same time, now saw that there could still be many—many drops of goodness, is how it came to him—many drops of happy—of good fellowship—ahead, and those drops of fellowship were not—had never been—his to withhold.

Withhold. (Saunders 249)

Unlike Gabriel, Eber leaves no ambiguity regarding what he plans on doing with his epiphany and his newfound knowledge. Even as his mind continues to deteriorate rapidly, he fights to find the goodness, the happiness, and the fellowship that will mark his remaining days. Gabriel is markedly less sure of what he intends to do with his remaining days, and it is my contention and conclusion that Joyce and Saunders use third person ventriloquism to illustrate the greatest difficulty of the human experience: accepting the unavoidable decay that awaits us all.

The Tie That Binds

Both Joyce and Saunders prove that neither a century nor 4,000 miles can separate one of the most basic human desires: to be vulnerable enough to love and to be loved in a world where reality is much darker than any of us might want to admit. And, because of these two collections, we are able to see that the short story provides readers with an easily accessible avenue into better coping with the human experience. Michael Schaub describes Saunders' fiction best in his NPR review of *Tenth of December*:

It would be tempting to believe that Saunders' fiction portrays society the way a fun-house mirror does, reflecting images that look familiar but are, finally, exaggerated and unreal. *Tenth of December* suggests that's not the case — that what we assumed was a nightmare is, in fact, our new reality. It also proves that Saunders is one of America's best writers of fiction, and that his stories are as weird, scary and devastating as America itself.

While all of what Schaub says is certainly valid, he fails to recognize that in the end the “new reality” is a place where human beings are still empowered. In fact, this is the most resounding message in *Tenth of December* and provides the final evidence of intertextuality that helps readers to better understand *Dubliners*.

The message of “The Dead” may be a little less direct, but can be inferred more clearly when using “Tenth of December” as a companion piece. With Gabriel’s recognition that the realms of the living and dead are closely touching, readers must decide what he or she does with that same knowledge. In this case intertextuality would say that the decision lies with Gabriel: he can make the most of the time that he has left, choosing to love Gretta as best he can; or he can continue to live absently, accepting that the love by which Gretta was so entranced will forever evade him. Eber is able to make his choice much more easily because of his love for his own wife, Molly. As Eber waits with Robin and Robin’s mother in their home, he recognizes the growth of their relationship over time:

When they were first married they used to fight. Say the most insane things. Afterward, sometimes there would be tears. Tears in bed? And then they would—Molly pressing her hot wet face against his hot wet

face. They were sorry, they were saying with their bodies, they were accepting each other back, and that feeling, that feeling of being accepted back again and again, of someone's affection for you expanding to encompass whatever new flawed thing had just manifested you, that was the deepest, dearest thing he'd ever—(Saunders 251).

This final moment of ventriloquism signifies that in the end the human experience is characterized by the ways we love. Eber was ready to selfishly end it all until a young outcast needed him as his savior. Gabriel sees death and remains unsure of what to do next.

Together these two collections teach their readers many lessons about the challenges of being human. The principle of intertextuality, like the inclusive studies of the humanities, teaches us that life is not simply a collection of compartmentalized and isolated experiences, but a tapestry of interconnected experiences that help us to see that we are all creatures who have been given the power to choose our life's course. There are Gabriel Conroys among us, who struggle to decide what they should do with the knowledge they have been given. There, too, are Don Ebers, who, just as they are near the brink of self-destruction, see that life is for living.

Works Cited

- Clapp, Rodney. "Empathy In Satire." *Christian Century* 130.11 (2013): 45. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 1 May 2015.
- Gray, Wallace, and Roger B. Blumberg. *World Wide Dubliners. World Wide Dubliners: Notes for James Joyce's "The Dead"* Brown University, 1997. Web. 25 March 2015.
- Joyce, James, and Edna O'Brien. *Dubliners*. New York, NY: New American Library, 1991. Print.
- Joyce, James, John Wyse. Jackson, and Bernard MacGinley. *James Joyce's Dubliners: An Illustrated Edition*. New York: St. Martin's, 1993. Print.
- Mahaffey, Vicki. *Collaborative Dubliners: Joyce in Dialogue*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 2012. Web.
- Percy, Benjamin. "In Celebration Of The Short Story." *Esquire* 159.2 (2013): 30. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 22 June 2015.
- Rehm, Diane. "George Saunders: "Tenth of December"." Interview. Audio blog post. *NPR: The Diane Rehm Show*. NPR, 12 Feb. 2013. Web. 1 June 2015.
- Saunders, George. "On Process." *Kenyon Review* 36.3 (2014): 4. *MasterFILE Premier*. Web. 15 May 2015.
- Saunders, George. *Tenth of December: Stories*. New York: Random House, 2013. Print.
- Schaub, Michael. "From George Saunders, A Dark 'December'" Rev. of *Tenth of December*. n.d.: n. pag. *NPR Books*. NPR, 08 Jan. 2013. Web. 18 June 2015.
- Thier, Aaron. "The Strange Arcane." *Nation* 296.14 (2013): 38-40. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 1 May 2015.

