James Joyce's Use of point of view in "The Dead"

Patrick T. Dunne

In this explication of James Joyce's use of point of view in "The Dead," I will show that he used two: third person omniscient and third person limited; that he used these to suggest Gabriel Conroy's movement from nothingness (pre-birth) to life to death, and that this movement symbolizes that of all men and of all human history.

Joyce divides "The Dead" into three sections. These sections correspond to Gabriel's movement: the first section to his movement from nothingness to birth, the second to his movement from birth through life, and the third of this movement from life to death. This explains Gabriel's absence at the beginning of the story–he has not yet "arrived"-- and the fact that he is absent from a little over half of this section. (This absence shall be explained below; it needs here only pointing out.) In the second section, that corresponding to Gabrieläs movement from birth through life, he is absent for under a fourth. The second paragraph of this section gives a condensed version of what happens on the symbolic level in this section as a whole: Gabriel moves from the distant past–Romeo and Juliet, the two princes in the Tower, Aunt Juliaäs childhood–to his childhood, and from that to his taking a degree at the Royal University, to his marriage, and then to death [1]. The final section is Gabriel's movement from life to death. At the end of this section, he is equated with the dead: "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 dissolving and dwindling" [2].

This, then, is the key to Joyce's use of the two points of view, for each section contains within itself this tripartite movement. It is at this level that Joyce uses the different points of view to indicate the different segments of the movement, third person omniscient to indicate the nothingness and the death segments (both of which shall henceforth be referred to as a death segment) and third person limited to indicate the life segments,

Thus in the first section of the story, we find that the segment from the beginning of the story to "'Well, thank, sir…'" [3] is narrated in third person omniscient. We know this by the fact that Gabriel is unknown to us at the start and that we are still unsure of who the protagonist is, Lily or Gabriel, until Gabriel leaves Lily and the story becomes his. This segment, then, is symbolic of death. The next running from the end of the first to the oint where Gabrie descends the stairs to meet Freddy Malins, is symbolic of life, for it is narrated in third person limited, which is shown by the fact that the story here is told from Gabrieläs point of view. During most of the last segment, which is the remainder of the first section, Gabriel is absent. Thus we have returned to third person omniscient narration, which is symbolic, again, of death. It can be seen, then that this section follows the movement of the story as a whole.

The second section, however, does not, for its movement is life-death-life. WHy this is so shall be explained below; for the moment, we shall be concerned only with how this movement is revealed. In the first segment of this section, which runs from the sentence, “Gabriel could not listen while Mary Jane was playing her Academy pice…to the hushed drawing-room…” [4] to the sentence “‘Very well,’ said Gabriel amiably, as he took another preparatory draught, äkindly forget my existence, ladies and gentlemen, for a few minutes…’” [5] we perceive what is occurring through the eyes of Gabriel; this segment is therefore, narrated in third person limited. And, therefore, is symbolic of life. The middle segment, that which begins with the sentence following the end of the first segment and ends with the sentence “The silence came and Gabriel pushed back his chair and stood up…” [6] is symbolic of death because of its third person omniscient narration, and because of its concern with death. This segment is the scene of the after-dinner discussion; those things discussed by the guests are the past (which is dead), monks (who are dead to the world), and the manner in which these monks sleep (in their coffins),. That this segment is narrated in third person omniscient we know from the fact that we do not perceive what is occurring through the eyes of Gabrie, for he is too busy with his eating (which in itself is symbolic of another type of death–intellectual. Gabriel concerns himself solely with perpetuating the life of his body and refuses to take part in a discussion which, as prosaic as it is, would perpetuate the life of his mind). The last segment of this section, like the first, is symbolic of life. It is that segment which begins with the sentence “The patting at once grew louder in encouragement and then ceased altogether…” [7]. And finished at the end of this section. This segment is symbolic of life because it is narrated in third person limited: we wee what is happening through the eyes of Gabriel.

The final section, like the first, contains the death-life-death movement. We know that the first segment of this section, which beings with “The piercing morning air came into the hall where they were standing…”[8] and ends with Mr. Browne saying “‘Teddy will have all the cabs in Dublin out…’” [9] is written in third person omniscient because Gabriel is absent. Because it is narrated in this manner, we also know that it is symbolic of death. The segment which follows this one starts at the end of the first and finishes with the sentence “His own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world, the solid world itself…was dissolving and dwindling.” [10] We know this segment to the symbolic of life, for it is seen through the eyes of Gabriel; therefore it is narrated in third person limited. Also because it contains Gabriel’s epiphany. The terminal segment, the last paragraph of the story, is symbolic of death. This segment is not narrated totally in third person omniscient, for a gradual shift from total third person limited point of view to third person omniscient occurs during the course of the paragraph. By doing this, joyce is giving a literary representation of Gabriel’s identity “...fading out into a gray impalpable world…” [11].

Thus within the larger movement, we have a death-life-death-life-death-life-death-life-death movement. This explains the inversion of the internal movement of the middle section: it is inverted so that a continuous movement will be suggested. That continuous movement is the movement of history. “The Dead” becomes, therefore, a

symbol within a symbol: in the particular, Gabriel's movement is contained in the universal, everyman's movement; in this universal is contained a further universal, history's movement.

Notes

1. James Joyce, "The Dead," in The Portable James Joyce, Harry Levin, ed., (New York:1967), p. 202f.
2. Ibid., p.241f.
3. Ibid., p.194.
4. Ibid., p.202.
5. Ibid., p.215.
6. Ibid., p.219.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., p.223.
9. Ibid., p.224.
10. Ibid., p.241f.
11. Ibid., p.242.