

Phi Kappa Phi Annual Student Paper Competition.

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The *Last Dead End*: Where Does the Emphasis *Fall*?

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For many years Western thought has privileged speaking over writing. In a way similar to the exalting of good over evil, writing has become the inferior component of the contrasting pair speaking/writing. Jacques Derrida named this concept phonocentrism and introduced the term *deconstruction* to America in 1966 with his paper “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Science” (Bressler 117). His entire mission was to “demonstrate the shaky foundations upon which such beliefs have been established” (Bressler 122). Ultimately Derrida’s work expanded and created a new “reading strategy,” different from a new “school of literary criticism” (Bressler 127).

The goal of deconstruction is not to prompt the reader to arrive at a destination, or specific interpretation of a text; rather, the reader experiences a lifetime journey of discovering and rediscovering the language of literary works. Deconstruction theory endeavors to show that “what a text claims it says and what it actually says are discernibly different” (Bressler 117). By searching for “places in the text where the author misspeaks” and by analyzing and reversing binary opposites the reader uncovers undecidability instead of concluding with a final, concrete interpretation (Bressler 128).

Although James Joyce lived before the introduction of deconstruction, many of his works “contain inherently heterogeneous elements whose double antithetical character resist being resolved into a single reading” (Riquelme 220). James Joyce proudly professed the conflicting undecidability of his works when he said, “I’ve put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant, and that’s the only way of insuring one’s immortality” (quoted in Ellmann 521). His belief has proven true; his works are still read, analyzed and ardently debated about today, years after his death.

“The Dead” is the concluding story of Joyce’s collection *Dubliners*. In this novella, Joyce’s protagonist Gabriel portrays the theme of “social and political paralysis in Ireland” through his interactions with his Aunts, his peers and his wife at a social gathering (Schwarz 19). By consciously reading this text with Derrida’s assertions in mind, an interesting multiplicity of interpretations arises. In his essay on “The Dead”, John Paul Riquelme asks, “How can the same story encourage two such different readings?”(Riquelme 220). The following is an example of Derrida’s concepts applied to Joyce’s “The Dead.” Ultimately, the previously stated question will fade into the background as the text intricately weaves a delicate pattern of images that justify the multiple meanings. Finally, it is important to note that deconstructors believe that “the interpretations themselves are just as creative and important as the text or texts being interpreted” (Bressler 117).

In “The Dead” by James Joyce, the encompassing binary opposite beginning/ending and the use of the repetitious image of falling intertwine to create multiple, seemingly irreconcilable readings of the text. By embracing the various denotations and connotations of the word *fall* and the contradicting interpretations of the phrase “their last end” (Joyce 42, 59), the text deconstructs the beginning/ending binary opposite, ultimately revealing that a beginning is defined only through its relationship to an ending. Clearly something cannot begin unless something else ends. In turn, the text does not necessarily reverse the binary opposite, for something cannot end unless something else is beginning. The distinct line separating the elements of the pair simply blurs as the life of Gabriel plays not as a slideshow with definite, separate snapshots, but as a film, continuously fading in and out of scenes.

The word *fall* and its various forms occur sixteen times throughout the text. Though “fall” traditionally carries a negative connotation, its use in some of these instances can create a

remarkably positive message. Many literary critics continue to discuss the chiasmic nature of the final sentence: “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 59, emphasis added). Here the phrase “falling faintly” is inverted, taking on a new, contrary meaning. This juxtaposition can be similarly applied to explain other uses of the word *fall* in the text. For example, the first use of the word *fall* occurs in the second paragraph in reference to the annual party: “Never once had it *fallen* flat” (Joyce 21, emphasis added). The text initially presents the word *fallen* in a familiar context, carrying the negative connotation, suggesting that something fallen is undesirable. However, through the pairing of “fallen” with “never,” the word acts in an opposite way, helping to create a positive meaning: the party had always been successful. This opening example sets the precedent for finding double meanings in the use of the word *fall*. Then, to sum up this intentional play on connotations, Joyce includes an image in the final scene which symbolically bookends the use of “fall” throughout the text. The image is of Gretta’s pair of boots: “One boot stood upright, its limp upper *fallen* down: the fellow of it lay upon its side” (Joyce 58, emphasis added). There are two sets of contradicting images presented here. First, in describing the single boot, Joyce's uses both “upright” and “fallen.” These two adjectives are antonyms. Second, as a pair, one of the boots is still standing up, while the other is lying down, another set of opposite images. Joyce seems to have placed this simple description at the end of the text to remind his readers that their conflicting interpretations of the word *fall* are intentional and correct. With these two opening and concluding examples in mind, the remaining uses of the word *fall* are easier to decipher and discuss.

The word occurs twice at the dinner table where Gabriel delivers his speech. Before beginning he comments: “It has *fallen* to my lot this evening, as in years past, to perform a very pleasing task but a task for which I am afraid my poor powers as a speaker are all too inadequate” (Joyce 42, emphasis added). In this case, “fallen” can indicate that his assigned speaking assignment is merely a result of unfortunate chance; but, because of the phrase “as in past years,” the meaning can also become positive, showing Gabriel taking on responsibility. Either he has drawn an unlucky card yet again and speaks not because he is capable or preferable, or he has accepted his traditional role as the speaker and is simply fulfilling his annual duty. This concept of “falling” as a passive versus active verb is again stressed as Gabriel continues: “his voice *falling* into a softer inflection, there are always in gatherings such as this, sadder thoughts that will recur to our minds: thoughts of the past, of youth, of changes...” (Joyce 44, emphasis added). If “falling” carries a passive implication, Gabriel displays an attitude of resigning or giving up as his voice drops off into a less confident tone. Alternatively, his tone can act as an active reflection, showing him falling back into the past, not to dwell or brood but to learn and remember. The use of the word *inflection* easily brings *reflection* to mind as Gabriel seems to draw his audience closer through dramatic, hushed tones of reverence for the past.

Then, as Gabriel and Gretta ascend the stairs to their hotel room, their feet are described as “*falling* in soft thuds on the thickly carpeted stairs” (Joyce 53, emphasis added). Because their falling feet are making a “soft” noise, “falling” becomes an easy action as the weight of gravity tugs at their legs. It is a mindless effort because the laws of the universe work in their favor. “Falling” takes on a negative nuance as gravity becomes a metaphor for passive progression. Although they are ascending, or progressing, it is simply because it is the easy path. Contrarily, if ascending the stairs represents fighting against gravity, “falling” sheds a positive light on the

text. Suddenly they are working against the crowd, “thudding” softly in order to make their voice heard but in a believable tone. Next, “Gabriel could hear the *falling* of the molten wax in to the tray” (Joyce 53, emphasis added). This sentence appears only a few lines after the previous mention of “falling.” The falling wax can symbolize decay. Eventually, the candle will melt in to a useless puddle of wax, no longer serving a purpose. Darkness replaces the light it once gave off. Yet, the idea of “molten wax” can also create an image emoting positive change, of being formed and molded into something new, maybe even better, as the excess falls away into the tray.

Finally, the concept of “falling” carries an underlying religious connotation: from the beginning, man has entered into a “fallen” state. In describing Gretta, Gabriel comments: “she had *fallen* to him so easily” (Joyce 55, emphasis added). The phrase seems to ring with the biblical story of Adam and Eve. “Fallen” in a negative light symbolizes Gretta as a fallen Eve. Nevertheless, humankind does not only fall in sin; falling also describes another passion: falling in love. With this in mind, “*fallen* to him” (Joyce 55, emphasis added) emits a romantic light and the next use of the word which occurs as Gabriel “let her hand *fall*” is easily explained (Joyce 58, emphasis added). This image can create negative feelings of separation, maybe signifying a break in their relationship since interlocked fingers typically symbolize a loving bond. Possibly, Gabriel concludes he is insignificant, having never possessed Gretta’s love completely. This action could also provide a representation of freedom. Maybe Gabriel has come to realize he holds a suffocating, dominant position and hopes to strengthen the marital partnership by equalizing Gretta.

Ultimately, the overwhelming majority of Joyce’s use of word *fall* occurs in the last paragraph of the text. Seven times Joyce describes how the snow falls. Preparing the way for this

finale is a symbolic cycle of interesting seasonal and weather references with explicit or underlying uses of the word *fall*. First, the opening line of the song sung by Mr. D'Arcy is: "O, the rain *falls* on my heavy locks" (Joyce 49, emphasis added). Rain typically precedes snow, and in this case, because it is paired with "fall," rain can unite with the season fall, a precursor to winter. Although simply hinted at through an added use of the elements of weather, the season fall parallels the underlying theme in the text by representing an additional denotation of the word *fall*. Second, a reference to spring creates a complete encasing and centering of winter as the primary focus as Mr. Browne comments: "I like that idea very much but wouldn't a comfortable spring bed do them as well as a coffin?" (Joyce 42). This dialogue can be paired with an image in the final scene where Joyce shows Gabriel "stretch[ing] himself cautiously along under the sheets and l[y]ing down beside his wife" (Joyce, 58). Uniting these two elements of the text through the common idea of sleeping in a bed reveals an implicit use of the word *fall*. Gabriel is *falling* asleep on a bed. Sleep often symbolizes death. By connecting this symbolism with "bed" and "falling," the image contrasts nicely with the statement in which Joyce describes the bed with the adjective "spring" since the season spring typically signifies life and rebirth. By including conflicting uses of the word *fall* to illustrate and imply the two seasons that surround winter, Joyce prepares for his final, ambiguous use of "fall," in which he describes the snow, ultimately commenting that it is "like the descent of their last end" (Joyce 59).

The phrase "their last end" (Joyce 42, 59) appears twice in the text. By drawing a parallel between this statement and the reoccurring concept of "falling," the text completes the deconstruction of the thematic beginning/ending binary opposite. Like the repetitions of "falling," the phrase "their last end" (Joyce 42, 59) takes on multiple meanings through a discussion of context and emphasis. First, if the phrase is emphasized "their last *end*" (Joyce 42,

59, emphasis added), the focus is placed on “end” as a single entity. In this light, the phrase symbolizes death. For example, the first time the phrase appears in the text is when Mary Jane comments, “The coffin is to remind them of their last end” (Joyce 42). By pairing the phrase with “coffin,” two representations of death result. The coffin image creates a representation of physical death and spiritual death surfaces through an explanation of why monks sleep in coffins: to try “to make up for the sins committed by all the sinners in the outside world” (Joyce 42). The phrase “their last end” (Joyce 59) appears once more in the final line of the text: Here, the confusing and ambiguous possessive pronoun “their” must be defined as both the snow and Gabriel’s soul. With the focus on “end,” Gabriel’s soul and the snow are falling for the last time. Once again, a spiritual death is portrayed by the fall of Gabriel’s soul, and the snow, which freezes and kills life, provides a symbol for physical death. Contrastingly, if the emphasis is reversed and the phrase is read “their *last* end” (Joyce 42, 59, emphasis added), suddenly “end” becomes the end of ends, or a beginning, implying a saving, eternal perspective. Then, the definition of “end” as a spiritual death now becomes the *last* spiritual death, signifying an application of redeeming grace in which spiritual death and sin are overcome. In addition, the definition of “end” as a physical death now becomes the *last* physical death, implying a resurrection.

Finally, scrutinizing the use of the word *descent* in describing “their last end,” (Joyce 59) sums up the negative, positive and religious connotations of “falling.” “Descent,” a synonym in some contexts for “falling,” also carries a double meaning. It could be referring to the idea of falling, as in literally moving downward (descending), or it could be referring to ancestry or lineage (descendants). If this is the case, the two identical phrases “their last end” (Joyce 42, 59) can be mutually linked with the idea of “all the sinners in the world” since the first descendant of

Gabriel is also the first “fallen” man (descended descendant); therefore, all men are related physically and spiritually through the common ancestor Adam.

In conclusion, Joyce poetically dramatizes the final use of the word *fall* through the chiasmus in the last sentence: “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 59, emphasis added). As Joyce directly pens a blunt example through the intentional inversion of “falling faintly” (Joyce 59), he provides the reader with proof that previous implicit alterations of emphasis are acceptable and intended. Ultimately, a negative light can be placed on the text resulting in an interpretation yielding a Gabriel who does not resist and is seen “faintly falling” as he fades, gives up, and allows the death of his soul in a deep “swoon” (Joyce 59) or faint. Without a living soul, the point of physical life “falls obliquely” (Joyce 59) into obscurity. Contrastingly, by reading all the references to “falling” and ending as a display of acceptance, Gabriel experiences a metaphorical resurrection through a newly discovered way of viewing the rest of humanity as his descendants. In this case, he is seen “falling faintly” (Joyce 59), or gently, delicately, barely and in a controlled way. He is falling back into the past in order to progress in the future. Ultimately, conclusions about Gabriel come full circle, meeting, intersecting and blending together to enhance meanings of the text. For Gabriel, an ending becomes a beginning and a beginning becomes an ending. Neither is superior, for one does not exist without the other.

In conclusion, returning to the roots of deconstruction, one key aspect remains unexplained. Derrida concisely summarized this newfound reading strategy with his fundamental term *différance*. The word itself contains various denotations because it “puns on two French words meaning ‘to differ’ and ‘to defer’” (Murfin 208). Derrida believed that words are not exact

representations of the things the “mean”; instead, they are “deferred presences” (Murfin 208). How we differentiate between two words is not through similarities, but how each differs from others. Finally, by exchanging the standard *e* for an *a*, a change that can only be discovered through writing since the two vowels produce the same pronunciation, Derrida created a “witty challenge to the notion that writing is inferior or ‘fallen’ speech” (Murfin 208, emphasis added). Those who do not fully appreciate or understand the beauty and capacity of literature may see this art as “fallen.” However, deconstruction can teach reluctant readers the play of words and the pleasure of language. James Joyce said: “The demand that I make of my reader is that he should devote his whole life to reading my works” (quoted in Ellmann 703). Deconstruction embraces this idea, believing that each reading provides new insight and interpretation. A close look at the repetitious image of “falling” in Joyce’s “The Dead” illuminates the expansive possibilities of written language. Deconstruction broadens the view of narrow readers while simultaneously helping them to sharpen their focus on the fine print of the great literary works whose multiple meanings add vivacity to the lives of those who are able to reach down to the bottom shelves and turn pages with wide eyes.

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