

86. Tapping Gabriel Conroy: An Investigation into the Mind Style of the Protagonist of *The Dead*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the mind-style of a well-known fictional character, Gabriel Conroy from James Joyce's short story, *The Dead*, in an attempt to better understand the stifling paralysis that characterises the protagonist's actions and behaviour in the narrative. This examination takes the form of a linguistic analysis of syntactic patterns and transitivity relations in the Free Indirect Discourse that characterizes Gabriel's speech and thought presentation, drawing on references from literary theory (specifically psychoanalytical and deconstructivist theory). The study concludes that patterns of intransitivity and syntactic similarity in the discourse reinforce the impression of Gabriel as neurotic and unsure of his identity, while his imaginative conceptualization of the falling snow in the final scene corresponds with an epiphany, a moment of self-realisation, which holds with it the promise of personal transformation.

Keywords: mind-style; transitivity analysis; free indirect discourse

Introduction

The starting point for this study is Fowler's (1996) term 'mind style', used to convey the notion that 'linguistic patterns in (part of) a text can project a particular world view' (p.95). To paraphrase Leech & Short (2007), the study of these linguistic patterns can help to explain how the fictional mind apprehends or conceptualises the fictional world (p.150). This paper represents an attempt to put this theory into practice via an analysis of the mind style of the principal character in James Joyce's short story, *The Dead* using approaches found in linguistics and literary theory.

Outline of 'The Dead'

The Dead is the concluding story of Joyce's *Dubliners*, a collection of fifteen short stories designed to expose the extent of the moral and spiritual paralysis afflicting the city's inhabitants. No-one is spared: age or class offer no protection from the stifling 'greyness'. Joyce wrote his collection as a Dubliner in exile, and his harsh indictment has been viewed by many critics not only as 'a wake-up call' to his compatriots, but also as an attempt to justify his abandonment of his native country. *The Dead* is a story in two distinct parts: the setting for the first is the Misses Morkan's annual dance and shows Gabriel Conroy – the hostesses' favourite nephew and the protagonist of *The Dead* – engaging in largely phatic and ritualised exchanges with the other guests. Although the story is told by a narrator in the third person all the events involving Gabriel are told from the character's point of view by means of indirect and free indirect thought. Via the latter we learn that Gabriel is a neurotic, self-absorbed individual who looks down on his elderly relatives and the other guests. Gabriel displays perfunctory communication skills: His principal spoken contributions during the Misses Morkan's dance are monologues (the after-dinner speech and the recounting of the story of Johnny the horse and King Billy's statue). He rarely converses and when he does his comments are literal and pedantic; his thoughts – as accessed through the text – seem as devoid of live metaphors as his speech.

In the second half of the story which focuses on Gabriel's private life, we see his elation at the prospect of spending a night alone with his wife at a Dublin hotel after the dance replaced by shame and self-ridicule when she reveals her lingering feelings for her long-dead lover. This revelation causes Gabriel to experience an epiphany (Joyce's term for a 'sudden spiritual manifestation') wherein he realises that salvation lies not in the narcissistic pursuit of personal advancement, but in the manifestation of love and compassion for his wife and fellow Dubliners. While it has to be acknowledged that this is only one of many possible readings of *The Dead*, it does correspond to a

widely accepted interpretation of the story, and it is this interpretation which has been adopted for the present study.

Studies of mind style

Leech and Short (2007, p.150) applied the term 'mind style' to the analysis of fictional characters with unorthodox or deviant minds, such as the mentally impaired Benjy in Faulkner's *The Sound and The Fury*. Benjy's narrative shows his knowledge of standard lexis and syntax to be limited. For example, he uses the verb 'hit' transitively when referring to a golf game: 'Through the fence...I could see them hitting'. However, the lexical repetition and unusual treatment of transitive verbs invite the reader to reconceptualise the world, and to see, for example, gardens as 'curling flower spaces' (p.163). Other linguists have identified patterns in lexis, syntax, transitivity, figurative language, speech representation and deixis in their explorations of mind style.

Advances in theories of cognition have led to the growth of cognitive linguistics and a fascination with the processes by which the reader perceives the fictional mind. Schema Theory proposes that we store information in conceptual packets corresponding to schemas or frames, which represent our experiential knowledge of events and phenomena. Schemas can be consolidated, refreshed, blocked or abandoned, depending on how much and how frequently our experiences deviate from our expectations. Many readers are likely to experience schema blocking when encountering an unusual mind style, such as Benjy's, until they comprehend the schema. At this point the de-familiarisation process may cause the reader to experience schema refreshment.

According to Lakoff & Johnson (1980), linguistic metaphors are representative of the underlying conceptual metaphors that govern the way we think. The repetition of novel linguistic metaphors by fictional characters therefore suggests a creative or deviant mind style at work. Weber (1996) reveals how the odd behaviour of Susan Rawlings in *To Room Nineteen* is conditioned by the unusual conceptual metaphor: Neurosis as military invasion, made evident through sentences such as 'She sat *defeating* the enemy, restlessness' (p.36).

Palmer (2004) argued that the fictional mind could not be satisfactorily comprehended via the study of speech and thought categories, such as free indirect thought, maintaining that the characters' mind can be accessed through their actions and behaviour via a 'continuing consciousness frame'. More recently, this view has been challenged by Rundquist (2014), who argues that the study of consciousness categories such as Free Indirect Thought are still relevant and necessary as 'contrasting categories highlight their semantic distinctions in terms of the aspects of consciousness they convey' (p.172). Summing up his objection to Palmer, Rundquist states:

The paradigm shift to cognitive science methodology that Palmer and others have embarked upon has focused on analysing readers' interactions with fictional minds as if they were real minds while de-prioritizing the mechanics and effects of linguistic variations in their textual construction. (p. 172).

Computers have had a considerable impact on the study of mind style. McIntyre & Archer (2010) carried out a computational analysis of semantic domains in Alan Bennet's play *The Lady in the Van*, concluding that the key words and semantic domains in the speech of the eccentric Miss Shepherd (who lived in a decrepit van in Bennet's front drive for 10 years) were linked to her key aspects of her mind style – insecurity and catholic guilt (p.181).

While the application of all the above approaches may be viable in certain contexts, it is the texts which often determine the best methodology to be applied to the investigation of mind style. Where the mind style is considered to be more imaginative or deviant, it may be possible for readers to experience schema modification or refreshment or to retrieve novel linguistic metaphors which conform to an overriding conceptual metaphor system. However, in cases where the descriptive prose speech or thought representation is devoid of linguist metaphors or a distinctive world view, it may be necessary to pay closer attention to specific linguistic elements and categories, such as the use transitive verbs or noun phrases in speech and thought representation. The latter scenario is true of *The Dead* and its protagonist, and it is the contention of this study that the mind style of Gabriel Conroy can be best investigated via a close analysis of lexical patterns and transitivity relations in the text.

Linguistic Analysis of *The Dead*

In his theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics, Halliday (2014) proposes three metafunctions of language: textual, interpersonal and ideational. Textual metafunction covers the organisation and pattern of texts; interpersonal metafunction deals with relations between various participants such as the writer and the reader. Transitivity relations are covered by the ideational metafunction and examine the function of verbs and noun phrases at clause level. In Halliday's transitivity system verbs represent processes, nouns represent participants (e.g. subjects), and adverbs and preposition groups (e.g. objects, complements) signify circumstances (ibid.).

Material processes refer to actions and events in the real world (predicates). More specifically, material event processes have an inanimate actor (e.g. The bomb exploded) whereas material action processes have an animate actor, who can either act wilfully via an intention process (e.g. I punched the bully) or be acted upon via a supervision process (e.g. He tripped over the step). In contrast, mental processes refer to internal mental processes (perceptions, reactions, cognition) and external mental processes (expressions of speech). The participants in material and mental processes are as follows:

Material processes:

Actor [+ Goal] e.g. John painted the door

Actor + Process e.g. The door opened

Mental processes:

Internal: Sensor + Phenomenon e.g. She thought about the offer

External: Sayer + Target e.g. He declared his love for her

(After Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014)

An examination of the basic verb processes used and the participant roles can determine who or what is acting in relation to Gabriel, and enable us to see how the text informs our perception of him. As has been established, we experience Gabriel largely through indirect and free indirect thought presentation. (This is somewhat problematical as it is not always clear who speech and thoughts are being accessed, those of the narrator, those of characters or those of the character filtered through the narrator in the form of indirect discourse). The high proportion of internalised mental processes associated with him compared to material action processes is therefore not surprising. Many of these are perceptual processes:

- 1) Gabriel...listened over the banisters (p.26)
- 2) Gabriel could not listen while Mary Jane was playing (p.30)
- 3) Gabriel hardly heard what she said (p.34)
- 4) He stared blankly down the staircase (p.38)
- 5) He stood ...gazing up at his wife (p.48)

Examples (1), (2), and (4) above exhibit intransitive relations. While Gabriel is clearly the sensor, the phenomenon is replaced by a circumstantial element. In (3) the phenomenon is virtually negated - 'Gabriel *hardly* heard what she said' – as well as not being explicitly stated. In example (5) the adverbial 'up' transforms the phrase 'up at his wife' so that it has a circumstantial resonance, and through syntactic distance we lose the sense of Gretta as an integral part of the phenomenon. Compare the above examples with Gabriel's perceptions regarding his wife:

- 6) He saw his wife making her way towards him (p.33)

7) Gabriel watched his wife who did not join in the conversation (p.50)

8) He watched her while she slept (p.58)

In the above transitive cases there are clearly two participants: Gabriel is the sensor or subject and Gretta, the phenomenon or object. The variation in transitivity between the two sets of examples illustrates Gabriel disassociation, his isolation from the people and events around him. This is prompted by a fear of intimacy, which is only dispelled in relation to Gretta, and what Schwarz terms his 'paralytic self-consciousness' (1994, p.105). According to the French structuralist theorist, Jacques Lacan, Gabriel is stuck at the mirror stage of development, the point where we first learn to construct ourselves as others see us (cited in Schwarz, 1994, p.203). Since Gabriel has no 'real' self, he has become a 'function of the perception of others', conforming to Laing's theory of 'The Divided Self' (cited in Schwarz, 1994, p.109) However Gabriel is uncomfortable with this inauthentic self. He is aware at least on one level that he lacks a coherent identity; hence his fear of intimacy.

This 'paralytic self-consciousness' is alluded to in the following examples of Gabriel's perceptual processes:

9) Gabriel found himself partnered with Miss Ivors (p.30)

10) Gabriel asked himself was he the cause of her abrupt departure (p.37)

11) He asked himself what is a woman...a symbol of (p.48)

12) He caught sight of himself in full length (p.55)

13) He saw himself as a ludicrous figure (p.56)

While Gabriel is the 'sensor', he is also clearly the 'affected' in the 'phenomenon'. The repetition of the reflexive pronoun 'himself' is consistent with the view of Gabriel as being overly self-aware. These syntactic patterns corroborate Schwarz's point 'that it is Gabriel's division between himself as subject and as object which is at the heart of the problem' (p.113). He may think that he is always being watched, but 'the one who is always watching Gabriel *is* Gabriel' (p.112).

A further pattern involving a repeated syntactic structure also gives us an insight into Gabriel's psyche:

14) Gabriel tried to cover his agitation by taking part in the dance with greater energy (p.32)

15) Gabriel tried to banish from his mind all memory of the unpleasant incident with Miss Ivors (p.33)

16) Gabriel tried to keep up his tone of cold interrogation, but his voice when he spoke was humble and indifferent' (p.56)

In each case we sense Gabriel struggling with himself, attempting to overcome his neuroses, and in each case the syntactic arrangement pre-empts his failure. From such patterning we derive the idea that failure is encoded in Gabriel's psyche. This resignation and anticipation of future failure is signalled in the text by the repetition of syntactic structures featuring 'would' in its future sense:

17) He *would* only make himself ridiculous by quoting poetry....They *would* think he was airing his superior education. He *would* fail with them... (p.24)

18) He *would* cast about in his mind for some words that might

console her, and *would* find only lame and useless ones. Yes, yes that *would* happen very soon. (p.58)

However, the use of 'would' is not only used to indicate Gabriel's pessimism:

- 19) He *would* call her softly...Perhaps she *would* not hear at once: she *would* be undressing...She *would* turn and look at him.. (p.52)

From the numerous examples of lexical and syntactic repetition in 'The Dead' we not only perceive Gabriel to be as pedantic as his thought representations; we also experience his perception of life as a series of scenes in a play, with himself as principal actor. This perception of self as other is epitomised by the scene in the hotel bedroom where Gabriel, catching his reflection, remarks about 'the face whose expression *always puzzled him* when he saw it in the mirror' (p.55).

Gabriel's near perpetual state of anxiety is revealed through lexical repetition:

- 20) Gabriel felt more at ease (p.31)
21) He felt quite at ease now (p.38)
22) Gabriel felt humiliated by the failure of his irony (p.56)

Another repeated syntactic arrangement reinforces the idea that Gabriel is controlled by his fears:

- 23) A look of perplexity appeared on Gabriel's face (p.31)
24) A shameful consciousness of his own person assailed him (p.56)
25) A vague terror seized Gabriel (p.57)

In the above examples, perceptions and emotions are presented as nominalised states. A simpler version of (23) might be 'Gabriel appeared perplexed', with Gabriel as sensor and 'perplexed' as phenomenon. The inversion of the participants, or passivisation, casts the mental state as the subject, while Gabriel is reduced to a mere circumstantial adjunct - or object as in the grammatical metaphors (24) and (25). In cognitive linguistic terms, the mental or behavioural state becomes the syntactic figure while Gabriel is perceived as the syntactic ground (Ungerer & Schmid, 1996, p.173). The effect of these 'inversions is to create a perception whereby Gabriel is controlled or acted upon by his emotions.

So far we have only examined evidence of Gabriel's mental processes. An investigation of some examples of material action processes supports our earlier findings:

- 26) He waited outside the drawing room (p.24)
27) He stood on the mat (p.25)
28) He stood still in the gloom (p.48)
29) Gabriel paced in a circle around the hall (p.47)
30) Gabriel stood stock-still for a moment (p.55)

The repeated or similar lexical choices clearly suggest the actor's inactivity, but this is arguably consolidated by the lack of an animate participant or goal. Through the cumulative effect of these patterns in the text we come to perceive Gabriel as being isolated as well as paralysed. Even when he moves – round in a circle – it is to no destination, to engage no-one. This linguistic

expression of inactivity is also investigated by Simpson and Montgomery in their analysis of Cal, the protagonist from the novel and film of the same name (1995, p.138). They list examples conforming to an ‘agent – material action process – affected’ pattern, where the agent, or part of his body, is also the affected, to illustrate Cal’s inactivity. Similar patterns are to be found in *The Dead*:

31) He continued scrapping his feet (p.23)

32) He...pulled his waistcoat down more tightly (p.24)

33) Gabriel...patted his tie reassuringly (p.25)

34) Gabriel knitted his brow (p.26)

35) He continued blinking his eyes (p.31)

In the above, Simpson and Montgomery’s definition of ‘affected’ has been extended to include Gabriel’s clothes as well as his body parts. I concur with the authors about the cumulative effect of these patterns but I would add that they not only reveal Gabriel’s lack of activity, but also point to his interaction with self, at the expense of interaction with others.

The changes in thought presentation and lexical choices evident in the final paragraphs of *The Dead* not only signify a heightened level of consciousness, but also indicate a dramatic shift in perception. We experience Gabriel’s thoughts directly at the moment of his epiphany –“Better pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dismally with age” (p.58). However the alternating voices of the third person narrator and Gabriel in the scene create ambiguity. The Deconstructionist, John Paul Riquelme, acknowledges the dichotomies in *The Dead*: He refers to the climax as having a style ‘that mediates between an internal and an external view’ and states ‘that such language, which is figurative, not referential, strenuously resists being translated as a single meaning’ (1994, p.224). I contend that the merging of the literal and the figurative is entirely consistent with a reading of Gabriel as being in a dream-like state, an interpretation supported by the lyricism and assonance of the last paragraph, and typified by 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’ (p.59).

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have seen how patterns of intransitivity and syntactic similarity have cumulatively revealed to us that Gabriel is a neurotic individual, painfully self-conscious, isolated by his fear of action and interaction and always prospecting his own failure. By examining some of the lexical, syntactic and transitivity patterns in the text it has been possible to establish a considerable amount about Gabriel’s incoherent and divided self. However we still do not really ‘know’ him. This may be due to his constant ‘dual’ with the third person narrator for our attention, but it is equally likely that the lack of idiosyncratic or ‘live’ metaphorical speech / thought presentation in the text prevents us from accessing his mind style. Further study of his mind style might involve examining deictic shift theory as explained by Stockwell (2002) - in particular focalisation through relational deictic shifts - in order to determine who is occupying the deictic centre at what point in the text – the author, narrator or Gabriel. This should enhance our textual perception of character. Until such times, however, Gabriel Conroy will remain very much an incomplete ‘literary character’.

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