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Bari K. Boyd  
*Mount St. Mary's University*

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# James Joyce's *Gnomon* of Pain in "Grace" and "The Dead"

## **Keywords**

James Joyce, Grace, The Dead

Bari K. Boyd  
Mount St. Mary's University

### James Joyce's *Gnomon* of Pain in "Grace" and "The Dead"

No matter how often we try to enter the light in James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914), in especially "Grace" and "The Dead," it always eludes us. In fact, the theme of un-touchable light both begins and ends the collection. In the second sentence of "The Sisters," the boy "passed...the lighted square of windows" (9). Similarly, in both "Grace," which had been the conclusion to *Dubliners* in the early manuscripts, and "The Dead," the final one, the theme is continued. In "Grace," the light the characters cannot reach is in the men's mis-remembered papal motto "*Lux upon Lux — Light upon Light*" (129). Finally, in "The Dead," Gabriel tells the porter, "we don't want any light" (163). Through the men's refusal and confusion, the theme of visible, but unreachable light shapes how we read *Dubliners* because, paradoxically, we are informed by what is missing. In effect, this motif of the missing thing is the *gnomon*, the geometric shape that includes the space left when a piece is removed. However, only through the knowledge that the piece of the shape is gone can we even recognize it as a *gnomon*. In the same way that we identify a *gnomon* by its omitted corner, the instances of light in *Dubliners* do not provide clarity, but show how the characters' inability to express their own darkness or pain prevents them from both connecting with others, and from escaping their paralysis.

What is missing also becomes what is inexpressible in *Dubliners*. In "Grace" and "The Dead," Kernan, Gabriel, and Gretta are unable to communicate, either through a speech impediment when Kernan bites off a piece of his tongue, through Gabriel's fear of judgment, or through Gretta's inability to express her emotional pain. For Joshua Pederson, standard trauma theory explains such silences as a response to pain: "trauma is an experience so intensely painful that the mind is unable to process it normally. In the immediate aftermath, the victim may totally forget the event. And if memories of the trauma return, they are often non-verbal, and the victim may be unable to describe them with words" (334). Yet Pederson then modifies this definition, redefining trauma theory as "traumatic memories

[that] are both memorable and speakable. Hence, a new generation of trauma theorists should emphasize both the accessibility of traumatic memory and the possibility that victims may construct reliable narrative accounts of it. Accordingly, these theorists should shift their attention away from gaps and toward actual text” (338). Although Pederson’s argument attempts to modify and advance our understanding of trauma theory, he tends to discount trauma’s extreme nature, since by definition, trauma is an event so painful it is repressed, memories of which kind are impossibly hard to access and express.

Modifying Pederson, I argue that trauma is still largely inexpressible, and can only be alluded to obliquely, a reading which will be supported by the language of the characters of Kernan, Gabriel, and Gretta in *Dubliners*. I use the specific moments where characters are rendered silent through their partial or poor self-expression as indicative of the things they cannot discuss. I am not looking for what is entirely missing, only what the characters avoid expressing, consciously or not. Language gaps similar to those of Kernan, Gretta, and Gabriel are termed “experiential avoidance” by researchers Steven Hayes and Elizabeth Gifford, who conclude: “a trauma survivor may avoid thinking or talking about the trauma because the very process of contacting it verbally will bring some of the stimulus functions of the original experience to bear in the description” (171). Here, pain is what is missing in language, or it is the *gnomon* of language. If the silence of pain is a *gnomon*, then instead of adding to the confusion, the missing pieces of “Grace” and “The Dead” reveal the identities of Kernan, Gretta, and Gabriel, and situate them in the context of *Dubliners*, a work that resists the reader’s attempts for complete understanding.

Like many stories of *Dubliners*, “Grace” and “The Dead” portray characters caught in circles, whether of Kernan’s alcoholism, Gretta’s emotional trauma, or Gabriel’s lack of understanding. They begin differently, “Grace” with a failed attempt to “lift [Kernan] up” (117), and “The Dead” with “Lily...run off her feet” (135). While “Grace” moves upward, “The Dead” moves downward. Yet, both end with tones that are paradoxically redemptive and condemning. In “Grace,” Father Purdon’s exhortation to “rectify” the wrong, to “set right” your “accounts” both redeems and condemns, because while it is literally meant as the way to heaven, it also, in the final words, shows Kernan again silently

paralyzed by the economics of religion (134). For “The Dead,” it is the famous “snow...faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead” (168). While some of the Irish under the snow are identified as “the living,” some are equally “dead,” showing again both the juxtaposition of redemption and condemnation, in the gentle blanket that snow provides for things beneath the soil, and the kiss of death for the living above. The final connection between the two endings, however, is Gabriel’s corresponding lapse into silence, mirroring Kernan’s, when he is overwhelmed by his pain.

Silence is indicated as more important than language through the final muteness of the characters, from whom we formerly understood the prior stories, setting up Joyce’s *gnomon*. However, the *gnomon* is defined in two ways. First, it is the pointer on a sundial that casts the shadow to indicate the time. Second, and more important for my purposes here, it is, according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, “the part of a parallelogram which remains after a similar parallelogram is taken away from one of its corners” (“gnomon”). The shape is an “L.” However, it is only possible to recognize the shape as a *gnomon* through the knowledge that the parallelogram is missing. Similarly, the missing pieces of “Grace” and “The Dead,” when identified, can help us understand the *gnomons* of the narratives through characters’ silence and subsequently blurred identities.

In “Grace,” Joyce first draws our attention to what is not being or cannot be said when Kernan bites off “a minute piece of [his] tongue” (119). The main character is then unable to speak clearly, the missing pieces of his words mirroring the *gnomon* as he misses hard or concrete consonants: ‘m’ (“meet”), ‘v’ (“very”), ‘b’ (“obliged”), ‘c’ (“can’t”), and ‘t’ (“tongue”) (119). Kernan’s words are each an individual *gnomon*, as each need the identification and placement of the missing consonant to be understood in the larger context of the sentence. If the man’s individual words are *gnomons*, then his sentences are much more so. Not once during the first scene in the bar does Kernan answer a question. When asked if he’s “all right,” he replies: “[it]’s nothing” (118). He later has the same response to “what’s the trouble” and simply refuses to reply to “where do you live” (118). The reply of “[it]’s nothing” has two meanings when used in conversation. In one sense it is literal: nothing has happened. In the other, however, it is an understatement: something has happened but the speaker is trying to minimize any acknowledgement of it. Despite the double meaning, in both senses the phrase is dismissive.

However, Kernan cannot actually be using the first sense, since something has happened, so he must instead be trying to hide the problem. Scott Klein pushes this reading further, asserting that “Kernan is not only unable to clarify what happened but is actively dismissive and obfuscating. He deliberately tries to minimize his injuries despite his real difficulty... [he] is unwilling to speak of the incident at any time” (115). The first event of the story, around which the narrative will settle, remains concealed, while repetition of Kernan’s response weds the phrases of “all right” and “the trouble.” While superficially it seems that Kernan is being deliberately obtuse, Klein misses Kernan’s legitimate attempt to answer the question he believes is being asked. When Cunningham questions Kernan during his convalescence, the invalid is helpful, if confused:

‘Who were you with?’ [...]  
 ‘A chap. I don’t know his name.... Little chap with sandy  
 hair...’  
 ‘And who else?’  
 ‘Harford.’ (123)

Although Kernan never explains what happened to him, he does try, indicating inability, rather than obstinacy. He also seems to view the two questions, of “what’s the trouble” and “where do you live,” one referential to him as a person, and the other to his events and surroundings, as the same (118). Not only do these phrases grammatically align, in that “the trouble” is “all right,” showing a passive acceptance of his circumstances, but the misunderstanding of the differences between a question of self and a question of surroundings also indicates a lack of understanding of identity, since Kernan seems to blur them together in his mind.

Kernan’s mental fuzziness is not only a product of his immediate experiences and current pain, but also of the alcohol he’s already consumed. He certainly wants more when he obliquely asks Power: “an’t we have a little...?” and later “express[es] his...regret...that they could not have a little drink together” (119). Even then, Kernan does not address his own real desire: he wants “a little.” Joyce also makes sure to reference only Kernan’s words to the “young man,” so that again, nothing of importance is actually spoken. But even if Kernan affects part of his confusion so as to not have

to explain, part of it is real. When he initially revives from the brandy, he “look[s] about him[self]... and then, understand[s]” (118). He must be drunk, because “shock and...incipient pain...partly... sober...him” (119). The alcohol then functions as another curtain that prevents our understanding. Because Kernan is drunk, he awakens without “understanding,” preventing him from relating his circumstances, even if he hadn’t bitten off part of his tongue (118). Both alcohol and injury prevent Kernan from identifying himself (“where do you live”), and explaining “what...the trouble” is (118). The two things that are most important in the beginning of any story—what is going on, and to whom it is happening, are not told. Any information given is ambiguous at best. Kernan occupies the former role of the narrator in establishing the story’s immediate *gnomon*, as critic Jean Kane argues: “Kernan, like the narrator, employs...ambiguous term[s].... The incident is ‘nothing,’ and if it must be named, it is ‘a little accident.’... The drunken man has forfeited the ability, and the right, to ‘speak’ himself.... The first scene of ‘Grace’ acts as a rehearsal for the rest of the story.... The Dubliners speak by biting their tongues” (196-197). However, even without the handicap of the bitten tongue or influence of alcohol, Kernan still “wished the details of the incident to remain vague” (124). Whatever has happened, the crux around which the rest of the narrative orbits, Kernan cannot even *want* to express it. Within the first two pages of “Grace,” Kernan, and even the crowd in the bar, who did not “kn[o]w who he was,” or what has happened to him, are unable to articulate either Kernan’s identity, or the pain behind his circumstances (117). Their inarticulate ignorance is the *gnomon*, the inexpressible.

Specifically, the omnipresent inexpressible in “Grace” is pain. In order, the questions that Mr. Kernan is unable to answer, or answers vaguely, are: “You’re all right now?”, “Where do you live?”, “What’s the trouble?”, “Can you walk?” (118), “How did you get yourself into this mess?”, “how the accident had happened” (119), “it doesn’t pain you now?” (122), and “who were you with?” (123). All require Kernan’s explanation of the events, and therefore his pain and humiliation. If “where do you live” seems to break the mold, Mrs. Kernan, upon her first introduction, realigns the question with the others, saying, “We were waiting for him to come home with the money. He never seems to think he has a home at all” (120-121). This reluctance to return home, instead moving between points in Dublin, essentially going nowhere, must have some basis. While Mrs. Kernan’s statement makes sense,

it strangely emphasizes Kernan's alcoholism or spending problems, instead of his unwillingness to go home, or more specifically, his not "think[ing that] he has a home." When home is the subject, and is naturally paired with unanswerable questions, the idea "home" is made synonymous with pain, the inhibitor of the other questions. Klein also points out that pain, and therefore violence, is emphasized by Joyce because "'Grace' stands alone in *Dubliners*...in having violent action as its initial impetus rather than its climatic result...Kernan's injury is the only instance of physical harm in Joyce other than that at the climax of 'Circe' in *Ulysses*, a scene that is virtually a repetition of the opening of 'Grace'" (117). However, although pain is pivotal, as seen in Kernan's unanswered questions, it renders characters silent.

In "The Dead," neither Gabriel nor Gretta can successfully express themselves, and instead remain silent. Gabriel was "undecided" about and "feared" for "his speech," believing that "the lines from Robert Browning...would be above the heads" of the party guests, and that "he would only make himself ridiculous" (138). Gabriel even concludes: "his whole speech was a mistake from the first to last, an utter failure" (138). "Speech" does not solely refer to his intended dinner oration, however, since Gabriel's lapse into self-condemnation immediately follows his memory of his previous awkward conversation with Lily. For Gabriel, "speech" in general is "an utter failure." Later, it is "the failure of his irony" that prevents dialogue with Gretta (165). Speech does not only fail for Gabriel, however, as Terence Murphy observes: "the famous passage in which Gabriel fails to recognize his own wife on the stairs is almost immediately echoed in the words of Aunt Julia during the long series of goodbyes before Gabriel and Gretta set off for the hotel" (595). As one goodbye suggests, "—O, good-night, Gretta, I didn't see you" (160). Gretta is invisible to the others, showing that it is impossible for any of the characters to even identify each other through words, let alone express more difficult things. When Gabriel errs while talking to Lily, he tries to fix his mistake by taking "a coin rapidly from his pocket. 'O Lily,' he said, thrusting it into her hands, 'it's Christmas-time, isn't it? Just...here's a little...'" (137). The coin moves from being hidden in Gabriel's pocket to being hidden or protected in Lily's hands. It is a secret thing, kept between the two of them, while functioning as payment, a public thing. Although at a basic level the scene presents an economic transaction, Gabriel pays her in penance for his mistake,

adding religious notes. During his apology, he stammers: “just...here’s a little...” never actually saying anything substantive. Gabriel’s words fail while offering amends for his failure of speech, leaving him caught in a cycle of silence.

Murphy uses the concept of co-reference choices, or chains, as “formed from out of that set of conceptually coherent choices by which the narrator establishes reference to a particular literary character,” to understand the characters’ secrets: “[a] co-reference choice enacts local patterns of character defamiliarization...the co-reference choices to the pivotal character are particularly marked; these patterns set apart that character whose function it is to send the main character on a journey of inward discovery” (Murphy 581-82). Yet his application of this theory to *Dubliners*, and to “The Dead” in particular, does not adequately account for the end of the story. Gabriel ultimately does not move, but remains in a state of incomprehension, especially of his wife. Although he perhaps embarks on the “journey of inward discovery,” he turns back before actually discovering anything.

The ending of “The Dead” is characterized by the failure of language of both Gabriel and Gretta, when they talk past each other without understanding, and re-presents the *gnomon*. First, Gabriel misidentifies Michael Furey repeatedly as “someone [Gretta] w[as] in love with,” a “delicate boy,” someone she is still “in love with,” her reason for “want[ing] to go to Galway,” and a person “she had been comparing him...with” (165). Gabriel focuses on what Gretta’s words could be indicating, rather than what she actually says. The inverse of this oblique conversation is Gretta’s inability to adequately express her pain at the death of Michael Furey. Her explanation ceases: “O, the day I heard that, that he was dead” (167). Joyce does not write ellipsis marks, or indicate at all that Gretta would have continued her sentence if she had not “flung herself face downward on the bed, sobbing in the quilt” (167). Gretta’s ability to speak ends where the trauma of Furey’s death begins. Again, we see that Gabriel’s life-changing anecdote is unfinished, and is unable to ever be, as the silence is more telling than any words, revealing Joyce’s *gnomon* of speech as a pivot for his characters’ incapacity to understand or express both their own suffering and the resulting vagueness of identity.

Like Mr. Kernan’s experiences in “Grace,” Gabriel’s night is unforgettable and shaped by his pain. Although Gretta’s revelations actually traumatize her husband, his suffering begins even before the

meal at their aunts, as shown in Gerard Quinn's argument highlighting the similarities between "The Dead" and The Last Supper: "it is clear that a meal is important in Joyce's story, and when the meal is over, the leading character, Gabriel Conroy, goes through a process not of physical suffering or death but certainly of mortification.... If Joyce is alluding to Tenebrae, which dramatizes Christ's imminent passion, he has found an elegant way of commenting on the pain of the night that Gabriel Conroy has ahead of him" (154). Quinn's analogies work, meaning that Joyce created Gabriel's character to be one trapped in pain. He suffers in a way that is almost laughable, until you recognize that, like the other characters, he is unable to express those feelings. Although Kernan experiences physical pain, and Gabriel feels emotional pain, both men experience humiliation. For Kernan it is in his public sprawl into the filthy bar floor, and for Gabriel it is the thought that his wife might not love him as much as a dead boy.

In spite of the differences in the pain felt by Gretta, Gabriel, and Kernan, all three are rendered silent. Although alcohol contributes to their inexpression, ultimately none of the characters are prevented from expressing their pain by an outside source. Instead, each is caught up in their memories. Like Kernan's terrible physical and mental experiences, Gabriel's emotional pain and Gretta's emotional and mental trauma prevent their speech. Their experiences therefore imprison their identities in the silences, which are expressions of Joyce's *gnomon*, showing us the parts of their identities that the characters are unable to express. Consequently, Kernan's, Gabriel's, and Gretta's identities themselves are the Joycean parallelograms that can be recognized through their *gnomons*. To be specific, Kernan's character is left as the victim of a fall, an alcoholic, while the reason for his fall and presence in the bar to begin with remain concealed, hiding the identity he had kept secret, and leaving us only with his public one. Gabriel, the literature professor, simply cannot speak, and although the narration follows him, it consistently hides his identity because of his fear of rejection. Gretta can articulate her feelings better than her husband; however, her adolescent emotional trauma prevents her from accessing the words necessary to describe it, locking that piece of her identity away as well. Each of the secret identities hidden by pain are the missing corners of the *gnomons* of individual characters, in addition to forming a larger *gnomon* of either "Grace" or "The Dead," or even of *Dubliners* as a whole. If seen,

they would complete the parallelogram, but if recognized, they would allow for the understanding of its nature and existence. Through the lens of Joyce's *gnomon*, we have greater access to unlocking the missing pieces, because we now know where to look.

In the context of Bloody Sunday, the traumatic 1972 event that impressed itself on Irish national understanding, the importance of what is missing makes sense. If trauma itself is almost inexpressible, then writing meaning in characters' silences would not only resonate with the Irish, but provide a method of understanding and accessing painful memories. While discussing *Bloody Sunday* (2002), a drama-documentary, Aileen Blaney writes: "[because of] the regeneration of historical consciousness...a number of...organizations have undertaken [to] address...the traumas of the previous quarter century of violence...educating the larger public... [on how] their suffering motivates their activities" (116). Victims are only now speaking, after 30 years, illustrating just how hard the expression of pain truly is. If trauma is found in the inexpressible, then James Joyce situates *Dubliners* in this narrative, beginning Irish literature's attempt to understand pain, 50 years before the Irish people would need to do so during "The Troubles," but immediately relevant to the imminent suffering of World War I, giving us the *gnomon's* sliver of light from a window, through which we can distinguish the darkness.

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