‘Do you think you’re at the Gresham?’: Accepting Imperfection in ‘The Dead’

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Abstract:
Dublin’s Gresham Hotel, where Gabriel and Gretta Conroy end their evening in Joyce’s most famous short story, has a fascinating history. It was founded in 1817 by Thomas Gresham, who began life as a foundling rescued from the steps of London’s Royal Exchange and was thereby given the name of the Renaissance statesman who built that exchange. This sixteenth-century Thomas Gresham was even better known, however, for his eponymous ‘Gresham’s Law’. Both Gresham’s Law and the hotel setting and history enter into and help to shape ‘The Dead’. Questions of value and valuing suggested by Gresham’s Law are shown to be more complicated than they initially appear, as they intersect with the various forms of hospitality traced in the story. The ‘secondary’ quality of the famous Dublin hotel (built by the second, unknown Thomas Gresham) underscores—and ultimately redeems—the theme of secondariness that runs through ‘The Dead’.

Keywords: James Joyce; modernism; Dubliners; hospitality; Gresham’s Law.

The public perception of the level at which the Gresham hotel operated, gave rise to a cliché, widely used when someone expected a task performed particularly well, ‘[D]o you think you’re at the Gresham[?]’

When Gabriel and Gretta Conroy leave the holiday party that occupies most of Joyce’s best-known short story, they do not return immediately to their own home and children in Monkstown. Instead they take a cab from Usher’s Island, where Gabriel’s aunts have set up house with their niece and host this annual affair, to the Gresham, one
of Dublin’s most fashionable hotels. It is here at the Gresham that matters take an unexpected turn, as Gretta reveals that she has been thinking not of her husband, but of her first love, a boy in the gasworks named Michael Furey, who died while only a teenager. Her revelation frustrates Gabriel’s romantic hopes for the evening. He is taken unawares by Gretta’s account of the youthful tragedy and is dismayed to find that he has been alone in what he believed was a mutual erotic desire building over the course of the journey from the party to the hotel.

The party itself has been a measured success. ‘Never once’, we are told, has the Misses Morkan’s annual dance ‘fallen flat’, and this time is no exception.\(^2\) There are minor hiccups, to be sure. Gabriel has at least two awkward run-ins: the first with Lily, the caretaker’s daughter, who reacts badly to his playful inquiry about her marriage prospects; the second with Molly Ivors, a university colleague who has discovered that Gabriel writes book reviews for the anti-nationalist \textit{Daily Express} and accuses him on this basis of being a ‘West Briton’ \((D\ 188)\); a third, arguably, with his own wife, who teases him for his solicitude on her own behalf and that of their children \((D\ 180–81)\). Nonetheless, one has the sense at the evening’s close that Gabriel’s aunts are pleased with him and that the guests have, by and large, enjoyed themselves. We may fault Gabriel for his snobbery: his thoughts about his aunts and the other guests are unkind; he does not fully engage in the various goings-on. But we join with him in his relief at the party’s conclusion and his desire to escape the claustrophobic house for the cold winter night air.

Gabriel has no sense of impending disaster as he and Gretta find a cab and head for the Gresham. Instead, he is elated, believing that he has escaped his relatives for one more year, and is to be rewarded by a passionate night with his wife, who appears especially beautiful to him as they settle into their hotel room. The oppressiveness of familial duties has heightened the attractiveness of the hotel’s anonymity and urban location for Gabriel. The couple, who arrive at the party ‘long after 10 o’clock’ \((D\ 176)\) and do not leave until the ‘piercing morning air’ \((D\ 206)\) is coming into the hall, reach the Gresham so late that even the staff is asleep. Their entry takes on a surreal quality as a result. Gabriel feels that he and Gretta are alone in the sleepy city center (a sharp contrast to the crowded drawing room of his aunts) and destined for a romantic interlude. Yet he has misread Gretta’s distant, distracted affect. While Gabriel has been thinking of the wonder of the life that has been with his wife – ‘Like the tender fires of stars, moments of their life together, that no one knew of or would ever know of, broke upon
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and illumined his memory’ (D 213)–Gretta has been thinking of an
unlived life that might have been: ‘He is dead, she said at length. He
died when he was only seventeen. Isn’t it a terrible thing to die so
young as that?’ (D 219).

The almost direct opposition in subject matter, tone, and
progression of the couple’s respective thoughts is striking. Outside the
hotel, Gabriel attempts wordlessly to remind Gretta of their shared
secret understanding. He relishes the sensation of being alone with his
wife, having eluded, if only temporarily, family and responsibilities:
‘Under cover of her silence he pressed her arm closely to his side; and,
as they stood at the hotel door, he felt that they had escaped from
home and friends and run away together’ (D 215). The images that
come to mind for Gabriel in this scene are evocative, but ultimately
unremarkable. The snapshots of his early courtship with Gretta, like
all such memories, are of significant value only to the person who
holds them and invests them with meaning. They can mean little or
nothing to one outside the relationship. This non-transferability makes
such recollections more intimate—but also more tenuous. There is no
guarantee that a couple holds identical or even similar memories of
such moments, as the story will go on to demonstrate. Outside the
hotel door with Gretta, Gabriel recalls another moment in which the
two stood together in the cold, watching a man make bottles in a
furnace:

They were standing on the crowded platform and he was placing a ticket
inside the warm palm of her glove. He was standing with her in the cold,
looking in through a grated window at a man making bottles in a roaring
furnace. It was very cold. Her face, fragrant in the cold air, was quite close
to his, and suddenly she called out to the man at the furnace:
—Is the fire hot, sir?

But the man could not hear her with the noise of the furnace. It was
just as well. He might have answered rudely. (D 213)

Inside the hotel room, shortly thereafter, Gretta announces aloud
the bare fact of Michael Furey’s death, a piece of information that
is entirely public, though unknown to her husband, meaningful to
the Conroys as a couple only in relation to what it has prevented—a
full life for Furey that might have included a continued relationship
with Gretta—and what is has, therefore, perhaps, made possible: the
consequent marriage of Gretta and Gabriel. Both memories, notably,
feature a lower-class man set apart by a window. In Gabriel’s case the
man is non-threatening. Sealed off from the couple by his enclosed
position and the noise of his work, and safely viewed from among an urban crowd, he cannot hear Gretta’s question. By contrast, Gretta’s memory of being alone in the country with Michael Furey, the would-be lover tossing gravel at her window in a desperate plea for her attention, features a man who can and does speak, and who risks his life to make contact with her. Reminded by a song overheard at the party of this boy from her youth in the West of Ireland, who used to sing this song, and who died after standing out in the rain to declare his love for her, Gretta is lost in a sorrowful remembrance of the past, of the lost life of Michael Furey, and the lost potential life of the person she was and might have become.

Hotels, Hospitality, and Gresham’s Law

The Conroys have purposefully chosen to spend a night away in relative anonymity at the Gresham, a well-established Dublin landmark. It is perhaps unsurprising that it is here, rather than in the presence of family and friends, or in their own home, that their domestic relationship is brought to a crisis. Gabriel has taken a room at the hotel for the sake of convenience, in an attempt to avoid repeating the experience of the previous year—a freezing ride home with the wind blowing in the open cab that left Gretta ill with a bad cold. ‘O the room is all right […] I’ve taken one in the Gresham’ (D 181), Gabriel assures his aunt upon arrival, with much the confidence and expectation of value that lies behind the quotation from which I take my title. Yet the Gresham becomes, for Gabriel and Gretta, not a sanctuary, or a place in which responsibilities or previous errors may be set aside, but a site of confrontation with the past. As they are led to their room, the couple seems transported backward in time—from the failed electric lighting, for which the porter apologizes, to the gas light seeping in from the street, a further reminder to Gretta of Michael Furey, the young boy in the gasworks who died for her.4

The Gresham, a top-rated luxury hotel both in the early twentieth century and today, is located right in the heart of Dublin (fig. 1). Known at the time of Joyce’s story for catering primarily to Irish and American guests, even serving as ‘a sort of headquarters for the Nationalist party’,5 the Gresham was always less posh—and less English—than the Shelbourne, the Dublin hotel that Elizabeth Bowen immortalized in her 1951 study (fig. 2).6 This strong nationalist affiliation of the Gresham is curious, to be certain. In light of Molly Ivors’s characterization of Gabriel as a ‘West Briton’ (and the story’s insistence on the fierce desire for upward mobility that Gabriel’s
mother imparted to both her sons), we might well expect him to opt for the more luxurious, more ‘English’ hotel.

Gabriel’s choice may be explained in part by the time of year. Paddy Fogarty, who began his career at the Gresham early in the twentieth century ‘when it was all horsecabs and only a few taxis’, and worked his way up over several decades from fourteen-year-old page boy to head concierge, notes that the Gresham grew both more busy and more English over the Christmas season, when it would be ‘booked out, mostly with English people’. There is no evidence within Joyce’s story of the hotel’s nationalist loyalties, nor are there representations of the Conroys’ fellow guests, Irish or English. Indeed, Gabriel’s choice to pass over the Shelbourne, where ‘the English lords and ladies stayed’ (Voices 78) seems rather to challenge the binary distinction Miss Ivors draws than to choose a side, confirming Paul Kintzele’s observation that ‘Gabriel appears to be much more like a continental internationalist than a pro-British unionist [. . . He] believes that the logical consequence of the parochial nationalism advocated by Miss Ivors is that it will shut out the world at large’. Joyce has clearly placed
Gretta and Gabriel quite deliberately at the Gresham. Introducing their intended destination early in the story, Joyce, ever sensitive to alliteration and the sounds of names, makes a point of giving both his main characters first names that start with a hard “G” and incorporate an ‘r’ sound, further connecting them to the hotel that enables their story, both practically and historically.

Thomas Gresham built his eponymous hotel in 1817. Having come to Ireland from England as a young man, Gresham worked as a butler before somehow acquiring the funds to purchase the houses at 21–22 Sackville Street (later O’Connell Street) that would make up the Gresham Hotel. This new and immediately successful Dublin hotelier was, perhaps most intriguingly, a foundling—an unidentified baby recovered from the steps of London’s Royal Exchange and, on this basis, given the name of the Renaissance merchant-statesman, Sir Thomas Gresham (1517–1579), who founded that exchange. The sixteenth-century Thomas Gresham is best known for devising ‘Gresham’s Law’—an economic principle that states, in colloquial terms, that ‘bad money will drive out good’. That is, if coins
made from valuable metal (and thus having intrinsic worth) and debased coins (coins made wholly or partly of base metals) are both in circulation—and have the same official, government-decreed, exchange value—the more intrinsically valuable pure coins will be removed from circulation and melted or hoarded, their innate value as metal being greater than their assigned face value, while the less valuable currency, because debased and therefore of less or no worth from a strictly material standpoint, will remain in circulation and be used to conduct transactions. As he himself circulates through the party and around the city (and puts several coins into circulation in the process), Gabriel struggles with the very issues of value and valuing brought to light by this law—as well as with the notions of secondariness and self-fashoning introduced by the hotel founder’s own biography. Are the coins Gabriel disburses necessarily devalued by their exchange? Is what is hoarded and removed from circulation necessarily more precious than what is openly shared? Can aspects of oneself be kept apart from daily interactions and obligations, and thereby made more meaningful? Or might the past add value to the present it has produced and the relationships it has enabled, rather than be lost or idealized in the name of progress? Both Thomas Greshams are among the ghosts that people ‘The Dead’, highlighting the complicated questions of value and valuing that run throughout Gabriel’s story. What does it means to hold onto or to let go of memories, people, and parts of one’s own identity—or to take in the same from others?

Hotels are spaces that offer the welcome and accommodation of hospitality in a decidedly for-profit manner. While the commercial nature of the transaction is evident to both hotel employees and guests, for the hospitality to appear genuine, the financial aspect of the transaction must remain semi-hidden. At the same time, the fact that guests are paying for their accommodations puts them in the role of consumers rather than of true guests (who must see themselves as the recipients of others’ generosity, rather than as paying customers). In other words, precisely because one pays for the hospitality of the hotel, that hospitality becomes artificial, but also acceptable (i.e., not suspect) and something for which one accrues no further obligations. By way of contrast, we might think about Freddy Malins’s impending visit to Mount Melleray, a monastery where alcoholics are permitted to come and dry out, and Mr. Browne’s dubious reaction at dinner to the fact that the monks do not charge for the stay, never asking for a penny-piece from their guests: “And do you mean to say,” asked Mr. Browne incredulously, “that a chap can go down there and live on the fat of the land and then
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come away without paying a farthing?” (D 200). And yet Mr. Browne appears oblivious to the fact that he has exhausted the goodwill of his own generous hostesses. A brief exchange among the three women indicates that Browne’s constant presence during the holiday season has grown tedious:

—Browne is out there, Aunt Kate, said Mary Jane.
—Browne is everywhere, said Aunt Kate, lowering her voice.
Mary Jane laughed at her tone.
—Really, she said archly, he is very attentive.
—He has been laid on here like the gas, said Aunt Kate in the same tone, all during the Christmas. (D 205)

While the other guests attempt to explain the monks’ religious or philanthropic motivations (and note that most who stay leave a donation of their own accord), Mr. Browne remains convinced that there is something suspect about such complete hospitality, that there must be a catch. A similarly non-commercial, though more pleasant, hotel experience is recounted by Freddy’s mother, who tells the story of the hotel she stayed at with her daughter and son-in-law while on vacation in Scotland. There her son-in-law caught a fish, which the man at the hotel cooked for their dinner, suggesting a strikingly domestic vision of the hotel in which the line between guest and service provider has been blurred.

Over the course of the evening, Gabriel performs his appointed duties without complaint. He dances with Miss Ivors, carves the roast, keeps a watchful eye on the intoxicated Freddy Malins, and does whatever else he can to fulfill the role that his aunts have assigned him. He even takes up hospitality as the subject of his dinner speech. Yet in no instance does he seem to the reader to get it quite right—largely (perhaps unfairly) because we are made privy to his ungracious thoughts as he goes through the motions. Gabriel attends the party in an unclear capacity—part guest and part host, and comfortable with neither role. In his much anticipated benediction, he praises the Irish hospitality shown by his aunts and by an older generation of Dubliners, casting aspersions on his own younger, more educated and cosmopolitan generation. Yet as he delivers the speech, Gabriel does not appear to feel any real attachment to the subjects he touches upon—the passing of time, the losses that come with age, the force of memory, and the need to look forward rather than to become mired in a past that cannot be changed. The privileged access we are given to Gabriel’s thoughts—his annoyance that Miss Ivors is not there to hear his implicit criticism of her in his characterization of the younger
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generation; his acknowledgment to himself that his aunts do not really
deserve the praise he is heaping upon them—discourages us from
assigning any degree of sincerity to the speech.

As the story moves on, however, all of these themes—and most
decidedly the respective forces of the past and the present—begin to
bear down on Gabriel. The message of resilience that he offers to the
dinner guests is eloquent, yet has no clear personal investment behind
it when spoken:

—But yet, continued Gabriel, 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, of absent faces
that we miss here tonight. Our path through life is strewn with many such
sad memories: and were we to brood upon them always we could not find
the heart to go on bravely with our work among the living. We have all of
us living duties and living affections which claim, and rightly claim, our
strenuous endeavours. (D 204)

Not until Gabriel is alone with Gretta does the prescience of the
somewhat formulaic reflection become evident. Gabriel’s challenge
is not, as he himself perhaps thinks, performing rightly, but feeling
rightly. It is only, ironically, when he is at the hotel, a place in which
hospitality is paid for by guests rather than expected from them,
that Gabriel is forced, or forces himself, upon Gretta’s revelation, to
acknowledge and accept his wife’s past, which has both undermined
and made possible her present.

For the Gresham’s history mirrors the couple’s own history. Its
flourishing state is built on a past that is generally unknown and that
even in its own right contains mysteries and myths of self-fashioning.
Aspects of the hotel’s history are also practically unknowable. Who the
Thomas Gresham that founded the hotel ‘really’ was—what the true
origins of this rescued Royal Exchange foundling might have been, or
where he really came from—are unanswerable and unhelpful questions.
Gretta Conroy also has another life, a past that has been unknown to
her husband, as well as a past that is unknowable, precisely because it
was not allowed to mature:

—It was in the winter, she said, about the beginning of the winter when
I was going to leave my grandmother’s and come up here to the convent.
And he was ill at the time in his lodgings in Galway and wouldn’t be let
out and his people in Oughterard were written to. He was in decline,
they said, or something like that. I never knew rightly.

She paused for a moment and sighed.
—Poor fellow, she said. He was very fond of me and he was such a gentle boy. We used to go out together, walking, you know, Gabriel, like the way they do in the country. He was going to study singing only for his health. He had a very good voice, poor Michael Furey.

—Well; and then? asked Gabriel. (D 220–21)

This past might have led to an alternative future in which Furey lived, and Gretta never became Gretta Conroy. Instead, as Jim LeBlanc argues, Gretta is left to live with the still-present memory of her young love—and to shape a meaning for his life in the context of her own.13 Michael Furey exists now only in the memory of the young man Gretta carries with her:

She paused for a moment to get her voice under control and then went on:

—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.

—And did you not tell him to go back? asked Gabriel.
—I implored of him to go home at once and told him he would get his death in the rain. But he said he did not want to live. I can see his eyes as well as well! He was standing at the end of the wall where there was a tree.
—And did he go home? asked Gabriel.
—Yes, he went home. And when I was only a week in the convent he died and he was buried in Oughterard where his people came from. O, the day I heard that, that he was dead! (D 221)

Gretta’s account is riddled with unanswered questions and incomplete knowledge—both her own uncertainty, then and now, of exactly what happened to Michael Furey (‘He was in decline; they said, or something like that’), and the unfulfilled potential of both Furey himself—who would have studied singing, but for his health; who might have lived, but for his exposure in the rain—and of the inchoate relationship. Gretta did not (and still does not) know the true state of Michael Furey’s health that winter, or the effect of his foray into the rain. Nor does she know what her alternate life would have looked like—whether she might have stayed in Galway and become Gretta Furey had things been different—and what it would have meant to be this other woman, living this other life.
‘It’s Christmas-time, isn’t it?’

Gabriel’s generosity, with his time as well as his money, is indisputable. He may hoard memories or feelings, but he is there when called upon by his aunts, and he is noticeably free with his finances, perpetually giving out coins as he progresses through the evening (first to Lily, then to the cab driver, earlier apparently as a loan to Freddy Malins). Yet he cannot seem to do so without some conflict being attached. Try as he does to buy pleasantness, affection, and the impression of generosity through his readiness to distribute money, Gabriel can only drive away what he seeks—and brings to light that which he wants to avoid. Believing he is spreading goodwill, or restoring good feeling, Gabriel instead finds himself circulating unpleasantness or unease—debased coins that do not appear to others to have the value of pure ones.

First he upsets Lily, who does not want to take his coin, put forward by Gabriel as a Christmas bonus of sorts, in an attempt to smooth over his misjudged small talk:

When he had flicked lustre into his shoes he stood up and pulled his waistcoat down more tightly on his plump body. Then he took 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 ... .

He walked rapidly towards the door.

—O no, sir! cried the girl, following him. Really, sir, I wouldn’t take it.

—Christmas-time! Christmas-time! said Gabriel, almost trotting to the stairs and waving his hand to her in deprecation.

The girl, seeing that he had gained the stairs, called out after him:

—Well, thank you, sir. (D 178–9)

While Gabriel’s intent is to correct what he feels was a faux pas or misstep on his own part, he makes matters more rather than less awkward by attempting to pay off Lily. Gabriel might have given his aunts’ servant something for Boxing Day (or ‘Christmas-time’), but it is now ten days later, and to offer Lily cash in the way he does creates a decidedly uncomfortable situation. The paltry nature of his offering only underscores how far short it falls of true generosity, such as that shown by the monks, or perhaps even by his aunts—or the kind of ultimate sacrifice suggested by his wife’s account of the death of Michael Furey.

One also wonders if this early misstep influences Gabriel’s later failure to tip the admittedly less than exemplary porter who shows the couple to their room at the Gresham. Perhaps overtired by the
tail-end of the holiday season, this porter does not live up to the energetic and ready portrait of the hotel’s employees painted by Paddy Fogarty (fig. 3) in Kevin C. Kearns’s *Dublin Voices*. The long-time employee describes the night porter’s job as including not only the ready greeting of guests and carrying of luggage, but the prompt overnight shining of shoes left in the hallway for this purpose by guests, which would be collected and delivered to him by the younger boys working at the hotel. The night porter would also be called upon to preserve the hotel’s reputation by keeping an eye on unmarried couples—and throwing out any man found in a lady’s room. ‘To be a good porter you have to have a good personality in the first place—and plenty of patience’ (*Voices* 79), Fogarty maintains, noting that when he arrived in the early years of the twentieth century, ‘the Gresham was the hotel in Europe with the best name’ (*Voices* 77). While Gabriel’s attempt to give money to Lily creates an uncomfortable situation, and might
indeed be viewed as inappropriate given their long acquaintance and the family connection, the porter would expect a tip—all the more so, one imagines, given the lateness of the couple’s arrival and the holiday season. Fogarty observes that as a servant at the Gresham ‘tipping was part of our wages’ (Voices 78). The popularity of the hotel among Americans appears to have been the driving force behind the tip-based economy. Fogarty recollects the generosity of American guests, who were startled to find such young boys working full-time jobs:

‘We got a very good type of Americans in those days the Americans were the best tippers. And the Americans couldn’t understand us working at 14 years of age and not going to school. And they’d go over give you a tip to page them, just to page them’. (Voices 78)
Servants at the Shelbourne were less fortunate, as Jimmy Dixon (fig. 4), who followed nearly the same path from page boy to concierge as Fogarty, only at the competing hotel, recalls:

In this hotel then it was mostly British people and they traveled by boat and train... We used to have an English timetable and we’d be booking people on boats into deluxe cabins. People asked you for so many things. Your head would be spinning […] Some evenings you would go home and say ‘Did I forget something?’ Cause if you gave them the wrong time for a boat you were in serious trouble. And tipping was not really important in them days. Not really. They used to give you gifts, like cuff-links or tie-pins, from guests who stayed a long time and you’d be giving them a hundred percent doing things for them. (Voices 57–58)

Extra vigilance in all matters of service was called for, both to keep up the hotel’s reputation (as a bastion of Irish hospitality) and in one’s own financial interest. The rather sloppy attitude of the night porter we find in Joyce’s story—and Gabriel’s own hurry to be rid of the man and attend to his wife—might also help to explain why Gabriel does not produce a tip here, the one place he would be expected to do so. But this oversight suggests that Gabriel is missing some basic understanding of the logic of conditional hospitality and economic exchange. Either he has forgotten to tip the porter or chooses not to; neither is an acceptable excuse.

Interestingly, Gabriel has no such trouble producing a tip for the cabdriver who takes him to the Gresham. Perhaps this is because he does not associate this man with Lily in the way he might a hotel servant taking him upstairs to his room. He overrides Bartell D’Arcy, who wants to pay his own fare for the cab he and the Conroys have shared:

When the cab drew up before the hotel Gabriel jumped out and, in spite of Mr Bartell D’Arcy’s protest, paid the driver. He gave the man a shilling over his fare. The man saluted and said:

—A prosperous New Year to you, sir.
—The same to you, said Gabriel cordially. (D 214–15)

More than any other character, D’Arcy is responsible for bringing Michael Furey into ‘The Dead’. It is his misremembered, unfinished rendering of ‘The Lass of Aughrim’ that reminds Gretta of her lost love. And it is his hoarseness-inducing cold, reminiscent of Furey’s own illness, which introduces a sour note into the evening’s final goodbyes. Again, Gabriel tries here, as he does earlier with Lily, to smooth over
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the disruption with a show of financial generosity, but he is unable, ultimately, to stave off the impending crash.

Gabriel makes a final effort to save the evening with his last, desperate attempt to show his financial generosity, and to draw Gretta out of the reverie in which he finds her. As we arrive at the climax of the story, Gabriel tells his wife about the pound he loaned to and recovered from Freddy Malins. In this moment, when Gretta is clearly distracted and deeply upset, such a mundane story seems almost perversely out of place to the reader: Nonetheless, Gabriel persists:

She went on to the window and stood there, looking out. Gabriel waited again and then, fearing that diffidence was about to conquer him, he said abruptly:
—By the way, Gretta!
—What is it?
—You know that poor fellow Malins? he said quickly.
—Yes. What about him?
—Well, poor fellow, he’s a decent sort of chap after all, continued Gabriel in a false voice. He gave me back that sovereign I lent him and I didn’t expect it really. It’s a pity he wouldn’t keep away from that Browne, because he’s not a bad fellow at heart […]
—When did you lend him the pound? she asked, after a pause.
Gabriel strove to restrain himself from breaking out into brutal language about the sottish Malins and his pound. He longed to cry to her from his soul, to crush her body against his, to overmaster her. But he said:
—O, at Christmas, when he opened that little Christmas-card shop in Henry Street. (D 216–17)

Despite Gabriel’s failings here and elsewhere in the story, I want to suggest that we are meant to understand him finally not as the pathetic figure he finds himself to be in the work’s famous conclusion, but as an imperfect one (a bit debased and worn from circulating, no doubt), who is nonetheless suited to survival in a modern world (and allows his wife to survive in that world as well) in a way that Michael Furey never could have. I further want to suggest that the Gresham, a symbol, through its founder, of this very idea of secondary status and self-reinvention and consequent success, is no accidental setting for this realization.

‘Absolutely strange news’

Paul Saint-Amour reads ‘The Dead’ as a meditation on hospitality, and the varied and unpredictable forms it can take. Invoking Jacques Derrida’s assertion that absolute hospitality, or the ‘Law’ of
hospitality is in conflict with more pragmatic ‘laws’ of hospitality, which assume conditions or ‘codified obligations’, Saint-Amour maintains that Gabriel’s willingness to hear and ‘stay with’ Gretta’s revelation in the story’s penultimate scene ‘performs the inseparability, the mutual haunting, of these two hospitalities’. In other words, simply by offering Gretta the conventional hospitality that has framed the rest of the story (and even that unwillingly, at first), Gabriel finds himself in unchartered territory, extending a willingness to hear what Gretta has to say, despite ‘his radical unreadiness’ (‘Hospitality’ 104) for what she then does say. Reading Gretta’s ‘he died for me’ as “he died that I might become me” (‘Hospitality’ 106), an interpretation that puts both Gretta and Gabriel—but most especially Gabriel—in Michael Furey’s debt, Saint-Amour suggests that the couple’s life together is dependent upon the young boy’s absence. Saint-Amour thus rewrites Furey’s role as sacrificial (he gave up the chance at a life with Gretta so that Gabriel might have it), rather than threatening.

The hospitality Gabriel extends is then, ironically, one that leaves him further in debt than he could have imagined. There is no way he could truly repay Furey for his sacrifice; Gabriel’s hospitality looks simultaneously tremendous and deeply inadequate. Saint-Amour’s observation of the radical nature of Gabriel’s hospitality—both in that he offers it to his own wife, rather than to a stranger, and that he reverses the gendered nature of Western hospitality narratives by extending such hospitality to a woman at all—is striking. Marjorie Howes makes a convincing argument that Gretta’s own story—her migration from one part of Ireland to another, and her ability to recover and reinvent herself in a new place (a story that was strikingly common at the time, as Irish women migrated within and outside of Ireland in great numbers in the later nineteenth century) is itself a hopeful component of the story, which speaks to a kind of resilience in Gretta that often goes unremarked. Gabriel himself does not immediately evidence such resilience; perhaps this moment of understanding is the point at which he must open himself not only to comforting his wife and hearing her story, but to understanding the force with which she has shaped her life and his own, extending a hospitality to him that he has never recognized or thought about. Suddenly it is Gabriel who appears to be the story’s greatest beneficiary of hospitality, despite his perpetual striving to be the generous and conciliatory host.

The universalizing gesture of the story’s final passage, ‘taking us in two paragraphs from a man’s tears to “Ireland” (colony? region? nation?), from a series of specific locales to “the universe”’
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(‘Hospitality’ 110), both increases the stakes of hospitality and confuses them. The rapid movement from Gabriel’s personal struggles to his sense that his own identity is ‘fading out into a grey, impalpable world’ (D 223), and his mental survey of the various parts of Ireland over which the snow is falling, do little to make the story’s final message clear. Unlike Charles Dickens’s ‘A Christmas Carol’, with which Saint-Amour’s compares Joyce’s story, ‘The Dead’ does not offer a roadmap for avoiding an undesirable future through positive action in the present. Further, it suggests that to do so would be impossible. Passivity, rather than activity, is called for as Gabriel watches the snow descend over Ireland—an attentiveness that is frustrating and disheartening, but for all that may preserve a readiness for the future: ‘Against the Carol’s, and Scrooge’s, impatience to interfere, [“The Dead”] urges and enacts a kind of messianic patience; its not yet says “it is still too early” to represent the political form to come. The Carol invites us to act before the inevitable happens; “The Dead” asks us to be vigilant in case the unforeseeable should arrive’ (‘Hospitality’ 112). Such a reading can only find ‘The Dead’ to end on an unsatisfying note. Gabriel has been disillusioned (however rightly or wrongly) about his marriage; he is either further disillusioned in his final meditations or again caught up in the trap of language—or both.\footnote{17} Yet one crucial fact remains lost in such a reading—that Joyce’s story ends, finally, not in the countryside of Gretta’s youth or in the eeriness of the snow-covered landscape beyond the window, but in the Gresham, in the confines of a hotel room with its own code and customs of hospitality, which both facilitates and stands apart from these final reflections.

Like the nineteenth-century Thomas Gresham, Gabriel finds himself in a secondary position here at the esteemed hotel, establishing himself in the shadow of one who has already left his mark. The story of the Gresham thus becomes Gabriel’s story as well as Gretta’s. But if this is so, then the Gresham must offer also an encouraging model of the self-creation and re-creation possible under such conditions. Both the hotel and the second Thomas Gresham are made wealthier rather than poorer by such narratives. Their own stories are enriched by what has come before, rather than lessened. Their place in the world is solidified and made all the more interesting by the conditional hospitality that has brought them to this point. Though the snow is unusual, Gabriel’s observation that it is ‘general all over Ireland’ (D 223) is obvious; it is the realization that it is falling on ‘the living and the dead’ (D 224) that makes it something more, suggesting a continuity that builds rather than detracts from the present. The Gresham is the one place we do not see Gabriel dispensing money, though it is clear that he, unlike
Freddy Malins, will be given a bill before he leaves. Gresham’s law says both that Gabriel will be a debased version of the pure, but unviable Michael Furey, and that he will live to be Greta’s husband.

Notes
3. While it is true that the anonymous hotel space allows for a freedom of speech and expression that may be awkward or impossible with children and neighbors close by, it is nonetheless worth observing that it is when the couple is most removed from their domestic, committed identities that these identities are brought to the forefront and subjected to scrutiny.
4. In ‘Gaslight, Ghostlight, Golliwog, Gaslight’, *James Joyce Quarterly* 46.1 (2008), 19–37, John Gordon traces the imagery of gaslight throughout the story, from Mr. Browne ‘laid on like the gas’(p. 20) all season to Michael Furey’s gasworks, to the ghastly presence of the young man’s ghost in the gaslight seeping in from the street to the Gresham, where the newly installed electric taps have failed.
5. Ulick O’Connor, *The Gresham Hotel 1865–1965* (Cork: Guy & Co., 1964), p. 15. O’Connor goes on to discuss this nationalist affiliation of the hotel in some detail, citing Parnell’s death and geographical convenience as the primary motivating factors:
   As the century came to an end, the Gresham began to attract a new type of customer–members of the Irish Home Rule Party. Stephen Gwynn states in his book *Dublin Old and New* that “the Gresham was for many years a sort of headquarters for the Nationalist Party.” Morrison’s Hotel at the corner of Nassau and Dawson Street, had been Parnell’s town abode. It was after his death that the Nationalist members began to stay at the Gresham in significant numbers. Across the road from the hotel were the offices of the United Irish League, the organisation centre of the reconstituted Irish party. When the National Directory was held at the Mansion House each year (the Convention of the Irish Party) the Gresham would be packed with delegates up for the occasion. (18)
6. Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Shelbourne Hotel* (New York: Knopf, 1951) offers a window into Dublin life through the history of this landmark hotel. The Shelbourne and the Gresham are roughly equidistant from the party’s location on Usher’s Island. The Shelbourne overlooks St. Stephen’s Green; the Gresham is right in the heart of the city, on what is now O’Connell Street.
9. See O’Connor’s *The Gresham Hotel 1865–1965* and Christopher Sands’s *The Gresham for Style* for a history of the hotel’s inception and its subsequent growth and development. The loss of the actual records of the hotel in a 1922 fire have regrettably left much desirable information unobtainable.
10. He also founded Gresham College, a tuition-free, Open University still in existence in London today. This free, open-access English institution offers a decided
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contrast to the elitism and the constraints felt by (and associated with) Gabriel Conroy as a Dublin literature professor.

11. In **Consuming Traditions: Modernity, Modernism, and the Commodified Authentic** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Elizabeth Outka unpacks the delicate negotiation between ‘guest’ and ‘customer’ undertaken by Selfridges department store in its attempt to make consumers feel that they were welcome visitors rather than potential buyers. The same negotiation (to an even greater extent, no doubt, given that one is not incidentally experiencing a stay at the hotel, but purchasing this as the primary commodity at hand) is implicit in each hotel transaction.

12. Mary Power registers the timeliness of Gabriel’s chosen topic, observing that ‘the loss of old customs and traditions was much analyzed and lamented in the popular press in 1904’. ‘A Note on Hospitality and “The Dead”’, *James Joyce Quarterly* 13.1 (1975), 109.


16. Marjorie Elizabeth Howes, ‘Tradition, Gender, and Migration in “The Dead,” or: How Many People Has Gretta Conroy Killed?’ *Yale Journal of Criticism* 15.1 (2002), 149–71. Howes details the vast numbers of women who left Ireland or migrated from one part of the country to another in this period, searching for financial and romantic opportunities in the wake of the Great Famine and the ongoing economic troubles. The unusually high number of women who carried out these journeys (and the success with which they did so) speaks to a determination and innate strength that is, as Howes suggests, very much lacking in Gabriel, while self-evident in Gretta—and, perhaps, in the defiant Lily as well.