

## Notes and Questions on “The Dead” by James Joyce

In a typical short story, the scope is very limited so as to allow the author to more or less fully explore a particular character, theme, or situation. In *Dubliners*, Joyce subverts this convention by presenting a series of vignettes that function as character sketches, introducing these individuals to us and suggesting all of the mysteries and unknown tragedies that lie beneath the surface of any human life. They are not explored fully but only hinted at, and the epiphany in each story, though it offers a revelation of a hidden truth, ultimately serves to emphasize how much we don't know.

“The Dead” in particular is suggestive of so many characters, themes, issues, and tragedies that it does not pursue. The reader is left, as we are so often in life, wondering about all of these things but having no clear answers. Why does Molly Ivors behave the way she does? Why does Freddy Malins have an intractable drinking problem that causes public embarrassment? Why is Lily so bitter towards men? And if she has experienced a profound tragedy that her husband has never had the least knowledge of, what other secrets might Gretta have? Figuratively speaking, what tragedies and secrets lie beneath the surface of the snow that covers everything? The story emphasizes the limits of our lives, the limits of our knowledge, and inevitability of death that will leave so many questions unanswered. We are haunted by all of those questions and possibilities, the way Gretta is haunted by thoughts of how her life might have been different if Michael Furey had lived.

### Discussion Questions:

1. What would you describe as the epiphany in the story?
2. What significance do the names of the characters in the story have?
3. What connections does the title have to the story—in what ways is it developed?
4. How do you think we are meant to perceive Gabriel—what impression of him does the story give you?
5. What thematic significance does “The Lass of Aughrim” have in the story?
6. What is the nature of Gabriel's love for Gretta?
7. What symbolic meaning might the snow have?