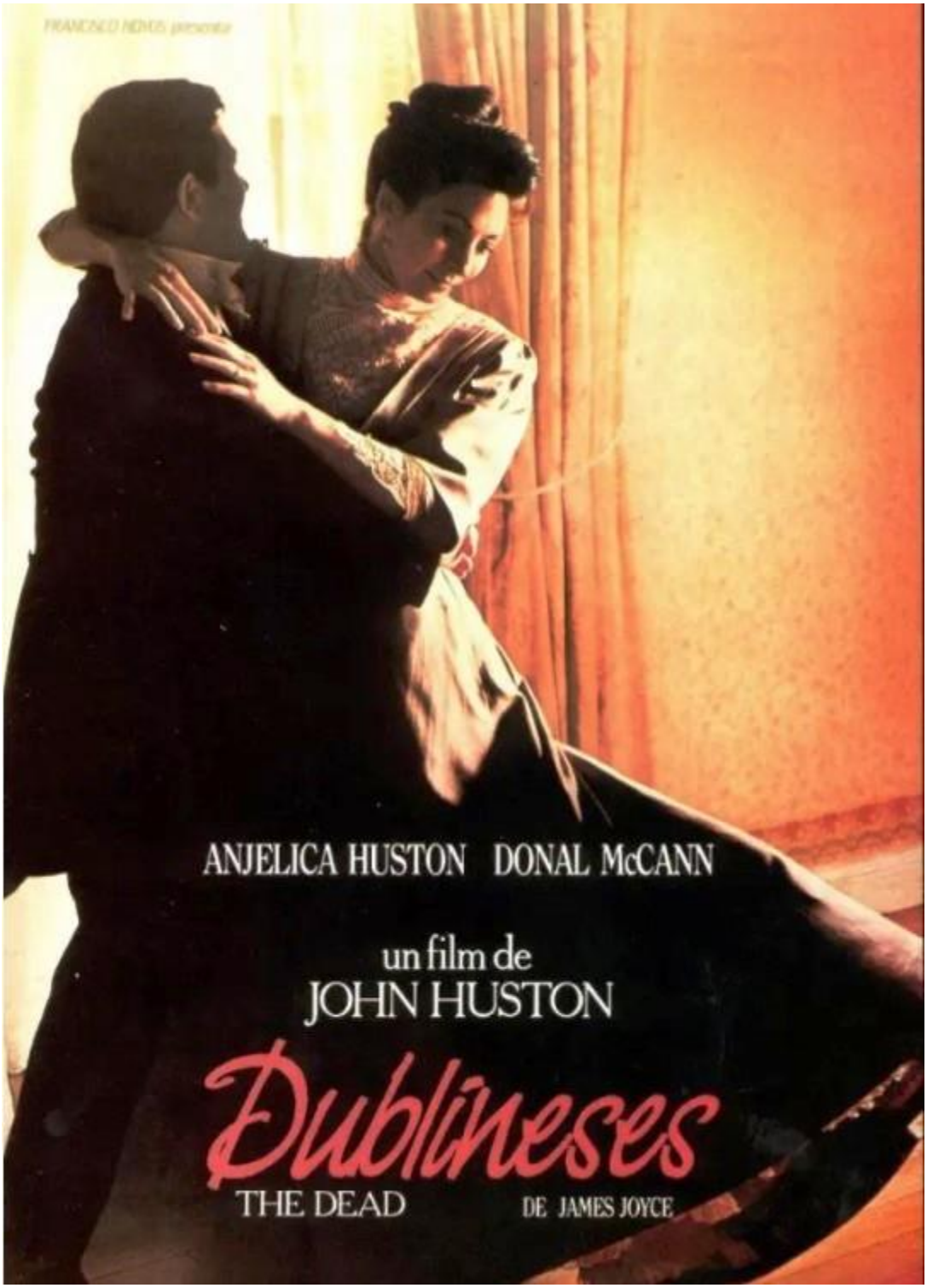
LITERATURE IN CINEMA: JAMES JOYCE'S DUBLIN SOCIETY OF 1904 BECOMES JOHN HUSTON'S SWAN SONG IN 1987



How many times, after watching a film based on a book, have we heard someone say, "The book is better"? In my view, this comparison misses the point, since each art form has its own means of communicating with its audience. The experience of reading a literary work is therefore fundamentally different from that

of watching the corresponding film, regardless of how "faithful" the film may be to the structure and atmosphere of the literary work. Here, however, we will consider a screen adaptation widely regarded as successful. It is the final short story—almost a novella—entitled "The Dead," from James Joyce's Dubliners, a collection of short stories published in 1914, a mosaic of Irish life in the Victorian era. John Huston adapted it for the screen in 1987, the year he died at the age of 81.

James Joyce (1882–1941), the son of a large, prosperous family that soon fell into social decline, studied under the Jesuits and immersed himself in the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas. He studied widely, from Aristotle to Ibsen and from Dante to Mallarmé. Yet, as his biographer Edna O'Brien points out, his real education came from elsewhere: "Quarrels, deaths, hunger, and constant financial problems were his bitter school, and they made him despise his family and his country. Like the wild geese, he wanted to fly far away. To feel European."

Although, like Joyce's other books, Dubliners had a troubled publication history, it is considered his most beloved and widely read work around the world. Among Joyce's most accessible works, Dubliners explores the paralysis of will, memory, and imagination, as well as the hypocrisy, misery, cowardice, and pettiness of a passive society deprived of spiritual vitality. The turbulent twentieth century is just beginning, and the great Irish writer, fully aware of the rigid reality paralysing his country, slips into the most unsuspecting corners of his beloved Dublin. Using the simplest fictional means—his effortless yet unparalleled perceptiveness, muted realist colours, and the disarming hesitation of his characters at critical moments—he succeeds in creating what may be the greatest short-story collection in the history of English-language literature. The stories in Dubliners are governed by accelerated decay, stagnation, deadlock, and death. Life and death continually intersect, forming small spaces and narrow horizons in which paralysis reigns. Nevertheless, Joyce ultimately affirms life and its possibilities and potential. The stories are neither merely naturalistic sketches nor constructions of elaborate symbolism. Joyce reveals the futility of a life trapped by social conventions, while offering an early glimpse of the technique he would use in all his later works: sentences that express moments of spiritual revelation, creating a narrative style that moves across many different levels of consciousness. If these stories were merely naturalistic depictions of the Irish middle class in early twentieth-century Dublin, they would be of little interest—or perhaps of interest only to the Irish. They matter because they portray a human condition that extends beyond Dublin and Ireland: frustration. To understand it, however, we must visit all the bars of Dublin and drink plenty of beer and whiskey with Joyce's characters.



Without a doubt, Dubliners depicts the world in which Joyce grew up: Victorian Dublin, where poverty provoked anger and hidden resentment was everywhere. It was a world steeped in hypocrisy and respectability, at times seeming unbearable and cynical. Perhaps this was why Joyce left the city he loved to hate and never returned. These short stories, which he began writing at the age of 22, capture the suffocation and anger he felt towards his birthplace, but also the strange tenderness he felt for it—the birthplace of the man who would later create Ulysses. Joyce regarded Dubliners as a chapter in the history of Irish manners and morals, drawing chiefly on memories from his childhood and adolescence, as well as on his observations of public life. Joyce truly manages to find beauty in the ugliness of a decaying society that seems beyond resurrection. The everyday stories of its citizens, indirectly connected, resemble dead ends or tunnels with no light at the end. Yet the descriptions of the city, the hopes and dreams of the "good" characters, and above all the author's pervasive affection seem to forgive all its suffering and leave open the possibility of a second chance for society, the country, and humanity—a chance that may not come immediately, but must surely come one day.

John Huston was dying as he directed The Dead. Wearing an oxygen mask, hunched over and confined to a wheelchair, weakened by emphysema and heart disease, he remained obsessively attentive to even the smallest nuance of the film he was making, fully aware of how much the work was straining his extremely fragile health. His daughter, Anjelica, played the crucial role of Gretta, while his son Tony worked on the screenplay and served as his father's

assistant, keeping the director's poor health a secret from the public. Joyce's story moves through subtle signals towards a final, powerful outpouring of grief and love. Until then, as Huston observed, "the biggest part of the action is trying to get across the harbour." Huston began filming The Dead in January 1987 and finished in April. In late August he died, three months before the film reached cinemas. With Dubliners, he left behind some of his most honest and genuinely revelatory work, bringing a quietly devastating conclusion to one of the major filmographies in American cinema.

In Dublin in 1904, on a snowy Epiphany night, most of the film takes place in the welcoming home of two elderly sisters, Julia (Katherine Delaney) and Kate (Helena Carroll), and their beloved niece (Ingrid Craig), who have spent their lives performing or teaching music. Their home offers warmth and comfort to the relatives and friends who visit. Line by line and scene by scene, the film faithfully reflects the book. Its atmosphere seems nostalgic, gentle, and full of affection.



The three hostesses—the kind-hearted Kate (right), Julia, who once had a "respectable" voice, and their beloved niece (left)—receive their guests' thanks.

The film ends sadly, yet it is one of the great romantic films, honest in both its sorrow and tenderness. John Huston, who lived in Ireland for years and raised his daughter Anjelica there until she was sixteen, felt an instinctive sympathy for the kindness with which the guests at the two elderly sisters' party accepted one another's lives and failures. They have all lost their hopes, and they know it. Freddy Malins is drunk, but as we see him sitting beside his mother, we suspect that she has encouraged him to pursue defeat. Molly Ivors supports the Republican cause and hurries off to one of their meetings, convinced that political solutions exist for the problems of the day. Aunt Julia, who admits that she once had a respectable voice, is persuaded to sing—and does so rather badly. Freddy hastens to lavish such exaggerated praise on her voice that he embarrasses her in front of her party

guests. Yet everyone understands that Julia's voice has "broken," despite the drunken Freddy's compliments.

Aunt Julia, with her "tired eyes" and now-broken voice, attempts in the film to sing Elvira's coloratura soprano aria "Son vergin vezzosa" ("I am a charming maiden"), from Act I, Scene 2 of Vincenzo Bellini's opera I Puritani.



Here we will hear the same aria, performed in its original language, Italian, about sixty years ago by one of the great "divas of the voice," Joan Sutherland. If you can overlook the dated visuals and the naïveté of the following lines from the opera's libretto, you will discover that the human voice is the most perfect musical instrument.

Ah sì. Ah, yes.

Son vergin vezzosa in vesta di sposa; / I am a charming maiden in my bridal gown,

son bianca ed umile qual giglio d'april, / white and humble as an April lily,

ho chiome odorose cui cinser tue rose, / my fragrant hair adorned with the roses you placed there,

ho il seno gentile del tuo monil. / and my delicate breast ready for your necklace.

Qual mattutina stella / Like a morning star

bella voglio brillar; / I wish to shine in beauty;

del crin le moli anella / the heavy ringlets of my hair

mi giova ad aggraziar, / help enhance my grace.

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Since we have been talking about I Puritani, I cannot resist sharing with you my favourite tenor aria from Italian bel canto: “A te, o cara” (“To you, my beloved”), from Act I, Scene 5.

A te, o cara, amor talora / To you, my beloved, love sometimes

Mi guido furtivo e in pianto; / led me secretly, through tears;

Or mi guida a te d'accanto / but now it leads me to your side

Tra la gioia e l'esultar. / amid joy and jubilation.

Al brillar di si bell'ora, / As this beautiful hour shines,

Se rammento il mio tormento / when I recall my torment,

Si raddoppia il mio contento, / my happiness is doubled,

M'e piu caro il palpitar. / and each heartbeat becomes dearer to me.

I chose a performance by the “commercial” tenor Andrea Bocelli. In my opinion, the warm colour of his voice outweighs any apparent limitations in his technique.

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Later, over dinner, the film’s guests discuss their favourite opera singers. Kind-hearted Aunt Kate expresses her admiration for the clear voice of a sweet, lyrical English tenor. It is indeed a distinctive vocal timbre, evident in the primitive recordings of the period, that seems to have disappeared today. In a 1929 recording, we hear the light “tenore di grazia” Heddle Nash performing Don Ottavio’s aria “Dalla sua pace” (“On her peace”), from Act I of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s Don Giovanni.

Dalla sua pace la mia dipende; / My peace depends on hers;

Quel che a lei piace vita mi rende, / what pleases her gives me life,

Quel che le increscе morte mi da. / what grieves her brings death to me.

S'ella sospira, sospiro anch'io; / If she sighs, I sigh too;

E mia quell'ira, quel pianto e mio; / her anger is mine, and so is her sorrow;

E non ho bene, s'ella non l'ha. / I cannot be happy unless she is.

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At the end of the long evening, Gabriel (Donal McCann), nephew of Julia and Kate, is about to leave with his wife, Gretta (Anjelica Huston), for the hotel where they will spend the night before returning the next morning to their home in a distant Dublin suburb. But when the plates and glasses are empty, the cheerful voices and songs fall silent, and the final embraces have been exchanged, a memory of someone beloved from Gretta's past, now dead, brings the evening to a melancholy close. It reminds us that death, even when temporarily absent, will always cast its shadow over human lives and destinies, and that "the snow will fall lightly over the universe, falling softly like the arrival of the final end over all the living and the dead."

The turning point comes as everyone leaves the party. Gabriel has already gone downstairs when, at last, the celebrated guest tenor Bartell D'Arcy begins to sing. Gabriel looks up and sees a figure pause on the staircase to listen. He eventually realises that it is his wife, Gretta. "There was grace and mystery in her attitude, as if she were a symbol," he thinks, and imagines that "if he were a painter, he would paint her in that pose." John Huston is a "painter," and he does just that. The song is the same one Michael Furey, Gretta's youthful love, used to sing to her, and it awakens all her sad memories of him. As Gretta prepares to leave with her husband, Gabriel, she hears the celebrated tenor who performed at the party singing the following traditional Irish song in a similarly lyrical vocal timbre to the one we have just heard:

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In The Dead, Joyce and Huston portray Gabriel as a man who has, in a fundamental sense, failed in life. For much of the story, we see him in a series of episodes that reveal his character—a character that eventually comes to a painful awareness of itself. The entire party serves as a prelude to the film's final hotel scene between Gabriel and Gretta. Gretta tells her husband a story he has never

heard: when she was seventeen, a boy named Michael Furey was tender and loving towards her, but he died. He was ill, yet stood in the rain on the night before she left their town, Galway, to continue her education at a convent school. “I begged him to go home at once and told him he would die in the rain,” Gretta recalls. “But Michael said he did not want to live.” Michael died when Gretta had been at the convent school for only a week. “What did he die of so young?” Gabriel asks. “Was it tuberculosis?” She replies, “I think he died for me.” In the final pages, Joyce enters Gabriel’s mind. Gabriel thinks of the dead boy, his wife’s first great love, and realises that he himself has never experienced love of that kind. He thinks of those who have died and of how the rest of us will also die, along with our loves and desires, hopes and regrets, plans and secrets: all will become dead. The film’s ending, with Gabriel’s inner monologue while his wife, having wept, now sleeps in their bed, is riveting. Gabriel feels the greatest disappointment of his life on discovering that his wife has kept such a secret. A young man, only seventeen, loved her when she herself was young and allowed himself to die after she left him. Michael’s love follows Gretta throughout her life like an obsession. When Gabriel learns this, he sinks into stunned reflection: “Better to pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than to fade and wither dismally with age.” There is a line in the story that neither Huston nor anyone else could put into a film, because it expresses Joyce’s thought, not Gabriel’s. As Gabriel looks at his sleeping wife in the hotel, “a strange, friendly pity for her entered his soul.” This is the sentence around which the whole story turns. He has been married for years and thinks he knows her, but suddenly he sees Gretta not merely as his wife, with her youthful love and their shared history, but as another human being who, too, will be alone on her journey westward.

Throughout the film, Gabriel is a witness to what unfolds. An early shot shows the back of his head in relation to everyone else in the room. Later, he finally sees his wife as the person she truly is and has always been. He also sees himself—his ambitions as a journalist, his family’s “distinguished” standing, and his elderly aunts’ pride in him—as, ultimately, an insignificant man relying on unworthy achievements. Could these have been the thoughts that passed through John Huston’s mind as he chose and directed his final film? How could they not? And if all these sad things were true, he could at least convey them to the film’s audience with grace and poetry, in a film as quiet and forgiving as the snow that falls in it.

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You can watch the entire film via the link:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/10wPy8lQ4gOTUfqGEEGVJ-vTWbwoY4yDP/view?usp=sharing

Finally, let us read together the last paragraph of James Joyce's Dubliners:

"A few light taps upon the pane made him turn to the window. It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. 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."