

The Puddock Principle & the Devereux Development:
Re-gendering *The Dead*, A Reformative Reading

by

Michael Murphy

"His errors are volitional and are
the portals of discovery"

The Puddock Principle & the Devereux Development:¹ Re-gendering *The Dead*, A Reformatory Reading.

Some years ago (2000) I published an article criticizing a number of feminist commentaries on *The Dead* for their excesses.² In my paper and in a rejoinder to a critic of it I said "It is excessive, unwarranted, and going beyond any reasonable view of the story to assert any or all of the following, as our critics do": that Gabriel Conroy's intentions are adulterous and insincere, that he has raped Lily and that he buys her silence with a gold coin like Corley in *Two Gallants*, that he practices 'tyrannies on the bodies of wife and children', that he is like the Duke of Ferrara, the egomaniac and murderer in a Browning poem, that he wants to violently decapitate and deform woman to make art, that he is a twentieth-century 'pornographic' hero like a man in Victorian dirty postcards, that Julia Morkan is killed by the Pope, a victim of sex discrimination, a species of ecclesiastical murder — and so, absurdly, on.

Most fair minded readers will agree that these summarized statements are self-evidently

¹ **The Puddock Principle** is a phrase I have borrowed from Vicki Mahaffy who used it in an essay on feminist criticism of Joyce in , **A Companion to James Joyce's *Ulysses*** , Margot Norris ed.(New York: The St Martin's, 1998), 153.

² "Gabebashing in Joyce Country, Some MsReadings of 'The Dead'" **English Studies** 81 (2000) 41-55 where these charges are set out in detail. Response by Vessala Vartala's, and Murphy's rejoinder are in **ES** 82 (2001) 323-5. {The "Gabebashing" paper is available on this website}.

excessive and unwarranted; but I suggest a possible way of *testing* the (in)adequacy of the kinds of criticism summarized in them. I do so because this kind of critique is altogether too typical of a kind that has gained a strong hold in our profession and that goes largely unchallenged in spite of its often absurd excesses, and I think that bad literary criticism needs to be confronted.

1

A Summary with a Difference: the Puddock Principle

Here is an outline of Joyce's story, emphasizing those scenes that are usually dwelt on by critics: the opening scenes with Gabriel talking to Lily and the aunts; the scene between Gabriel and Miss Ivors during the party; the scene with Gretta on the stairs near the end of the party; and the scene in the hotel bedroom between Gretta and Gabriel. In the lengthy summary the phrasing of the story itself (without quotation marks) is used where possible, but there is one important change : the principal male and female parts are reversed. For example, it is Gretta, the wife, who has the encounter with a bootboy Billy (not the maid Lily), with a teacher named Mr Maury Ivors (not Miss Molly Ivors), and with her own husband in the bedroom.

This reading tactic is an exercise of the *Puddock Principle*, after the character in a book well known to Joyce and his father: Sheridan Lefanu's **House by the Churchyard**.

Lieutenant Puddock says:

“By changing an old person to a young, a comical to a melancholy, or the reverse, sometimes a male for a female or a female for a male – I assure you, you can so entirely disguise the piece and yet produce situations so new and surprising”

*(about p. 135 of **H by C**).*

This passage is noted by Vicki Mahaffy in the aforementioned essay (see f/n 1) on feminist criticism of **Ulysses** where she suggests that Joyce adopts a variant of the

Puddock Principle “to oppose the hero as a gendered construction, defined not only by sex but also by age, race and class. The different roles in a Shakespeare play or a Homeric epic are not reversible without dramatic alterations in meaning for the simple reason that the meanings of sex, age and class inhere in the culture; the text merely plays against them.” I am not sure why they are more readily reversible in a Joyce novel. At any rate, I find the roles fairly plausibly reversible in *The Dead*, a Joyce short story which, feminist critics insist, shows up Gabriel’s “masculinist” outlook and the narrator’s “oppressive” stance which Joyce is either applauding or assaulting.

Since *my* variation on the Puddock Principle is just an outline or summary, it needs the temporary indulgence by a reader who is willing to ask and answer the question: *How would the kind of criticism being censured apply to this mirror tale?* — which goes as follows:

As a middle-aged married couple come in the door to a party being given by their relatives, the wife makes an exculpatory remark about her husband keeping them late, a mixture of annoyance and good humor.

The wife (Gretta) is helped off with her coat by Billy, a young bootboy whom she has known since he was a little lad playing with marbles, and, as the others move upstairs, she makes small talk with him about his girlfriends. He responds with an unexpectedly bitter remark: “The women that is now is only all palaver and what they can get out of you.” She is taken aback by the unprovoked rudeness in response to her harmless chat. Tolerantly putting his bad manners down to adolescent angst, she takes a coin from her bag and tips him anyway: “Oh, Billy,” she says, thrusting it into his reluctant hand, “it’s Christmas time, isn’t it?” To avoid his inevitable objection to the tip she moves rapidly upstairs to the party. As she does so, the boy goes through the motions of refusing her money but keeps it anyway and thanks her gracelessly: “Well, thank you, — ma’am.”

While the couple, Gabriel and Gretta, chat with their hostesses, the husband laughingly chides his wife for her excessive concern about his health and that of their children, even

wanting him to wear goloshes. The two aunts laugh heartily too, for Gretta's solicitude about her family is a standing joke with them.

In the course of the evening, Mr Maury Ivors, a colleague of the husband, a man they both know, takes it into his head to mock Gretta for her continental tastes and what he calls her West Britonism. (She likes an occasional trip to Europe, and she writes literary reviews for a mildly Unionist newspaper). She is really nettled at this unprovoked jibe. They are supposed to be at a party, and it is not the time or place for him to flaunt his newly-discovered nationalistic politics so ostentatiously. God! Doesn't that man have any life outside of good causes? He's even wearing a fáiinne on his lapel now, and seems to suppose that only those people are genuinely Irish who think like him and know a few phrases of the Irish language. "Irish is not my language," she snaps at him. "To tell you the truth, I'm sick of my own country, sick of it". This only provokes Ivors into more taunting. Shortly afterwards, Ivors makes a point of leaving abruptly without eating and without giving a reason to anyone, except that "he wasn't in the least hungry and had already overstayed his time."

As the party is breaking up, Gretta stands in the hallway and notices her husband, his head in shadow on the stairs, listening to the faint voice of someone singing, and she thinks what a fine figure of a man he cuts still. She feels both artistic and poetic for a moment. She would love to paint him looking just like that if she had artistic talent; she'd call it "Distant Music." If she were a poet, she might know what that framed moment in time was a symbol of.

On the way home, as she walks with another guest behind her husband, and again as she sits beside him in the carriage, her pride in him turns to strong sexual desire as she is moved by fond memories of their younger days. She looks forward to being alone with him, a rare event for a couple with young children, and when they get to the hotel she can barely restrain herself from throwing herself at him. But he does not seem to sense her passion. She temporizes by making small talk, mentioning some little favor she has done for the tedious Mrs Malins. His response is to give her a chaste peck on the cheek as he

undoes his tie absentmindedly, saying: “You are a good person, Gretta .” Looking out the window at the gaslight and the snow, he begins to talk about how that song he heard as they were leaving the party reminded him of an old girlfriend he had years ago who died young. Gretta listens to his emotional memories of another girl or woman who had loved him with what he seems to remember as a far greater passion than her own. She tries to feign an interest, and even asks a few barbed questions, but he does not even notice her hurt or her irony and his own tactlessness. He heaves his bulk into bed, tired but still speaking of his dead love, and promptly falls fast asleep. Desire drains out of Gretta like cold rain. She stands there in the freezing room, humiliated by her own recent surge of desire for this -- this man, her husband no less, in love with a ghost. “You’re a good *person*,” indeed! She isn’t even a *woman*.

As she sees herself in the mirror, a shameful consciousness of her own person assails her. She sees herself as a ludicrous figure idealizing her own vulgar lust. Shame burns on her forehead as she gets into the cold bed beside him.

Would vigorous verbal assaults by critics on this Gretta be appropriate, especially accompanied by accusations of the kind we have mentioned above? If not, why not?

2

A New Reading: the Devereux Development

Captain Devereux takes up Puddock’s suggestion for reversing roles in fictional work. Let us do something similar – this time producing a parallel kind of *reading*, an androgendered *commentary* on the tale, frankly logo-phallogocentric rather than logonyocentric, “forthrightly acknowledging the partiality of its own interpretation”,³ and

³ The phrase in quotation marks is from the now notorious 1989 letter of the PMLA Seventeen or Twenty Three in response to an article by Richard Levin in the journal the year before.

thus testing the adequacy and propriety of prosecutorial criticism in a second way.

The characters retain their original "genders" in this version.

The point of this exercise also is to answer the questions: Is this a reasonable critical reading of the story? If not, why not?

A middle-aged married couple come to a party being given by the husband's relatives. From the beginning of the evening to the end the husband is subjected to a series of minor slights and petty humiliations mostly at the hands of women, including his wife. Gabriel tries to hold his own in an autocratic matriarchy, tries to keep some independence from the regiment of women whose representatives range from older ones outwardly pleasant for the most part, to the youngest one who is already well versed in misandrist rudeness. Indeed, almost all the women in the story are at some point rude or snobbish, whining, domineering or manipulative, quietly or bluntly.

The older women, the Morkans, are and have been hard to please, including Gabriel's dead mother who had complained that Gretta wasn't good enough for her high-born offspring. And clearly she expected her preferences to be decisive: the one family picture we see shows the matriarch **instructing** the boy Constantine, who obediently avoided bringing another woman into his life or his mother's by becoming a priest. Gabriel had dared to cross the hegemonic matriarchal wish, had wooed and won his Juliet, and like his own father, had sired two children. Gabriel and his father are excluded from the picture completely because Conroy senior, the father, has no further function or obligation, and Gabriel has refused his. So, in this virginal Morkan household, only Father Constantine, the one who does not deserve the title, who has suppressed his manhood and put on skirted vestments, only *he* has his portrait on the walls.

The hostesses, Kate and Julia, are unmarried, probably because they thought **their** suitors were not good enough, if they ever had any. They had all been a little like Miss Devlin of *A Mother*. Highly educated musically like them, "when she came to the age of marriage, she was sent out to many houses where her playing and ivory manners were

much admired. She sat amid the chilly circle of her accomplishments, waiting for some suitor to brave it and offer her a brilliant life. But the young men whom she met were ordinary and she gave them no encouragement.” Clearly Gabriel’s mother was the pragmatic one: as Miss Devlin became Mrs Kearney, “out of spite”, Miss Morkan had become Mrs Conroy, who then proceeded to vent spite on her offspring, trying to prevent the marriage of one son and succeeding with the other.

Aunt Kate complains about the papal decree (widely ignored in practice) dismissing women from some church choirs for the (unstated) reason that choir singing had given opportunities for unbecoming liaisons of a certain kind that had in turn given mixed choirs in some places a bad name for mixing more than their voices. (A small if rather innocent version of this between Marion Tweedy and Bartell Darcy, is remembered with something like fondness by Molly Bloom in *Ulysses*). Even so, Kate’s passionate complaint on her sister’s behalf seems misplaced since Aunt Julia is still, as the story clearly says, “the leading soprano in Adam and Eve’s.”

The other older woman, Freddie's mother, drones and rambles. Small wonder that Freddie is as he is. His rebellion against the regiment of women is to drink too much and be an embarrassment to all. He repays Gabriel’s loan with a sovereign which he has extracted from the mother as the price of taking the pledge that he has inevitably broken because he cannot face the reality of her and the rest of the gynarchy. Though they have not priested Freddy, they have effectively unmanned him as they did Constantine. And for this sorry prince the inept alternative for an escape from the tower is to get drunk regularly, extract money for the promise of reform, go through the pretense of honest work with a Christmas-card shop, and then promptly break his promise by falling or jumping off the wagon.

The younger women from Lily through Molly Ivors to Gretta Conroy complain or behave with varying degrees of reason and unreason. Gretta arrives late without apology, having caused Gabriel to be late, to the minor distress of his aunts, and thus inflicts a small embarrassment on him. She publicly mocks her husband for his concern about her health and that of her children. On the surface this is fairly typical of the good-natured banter of

wives and husbands who are very married and are in the company of friends; but underneath, we are assured even by feminist critics, that Gretta is like her hostile mother-in-law after all, and resents Gabriel's attempt at interference in matriarchy, particularly in an area, the rearing of young children, where by tradition the wife and mother exerts total hegemony, as Gabriel so well knows to his cost.

The resentment is probably all the greater because of the rather unconcerned mother that Gretta is, and she feels rebuked for it. Unlike Lily, the servant girl who lives somewhat bitterly in contemporary Dublin, Gretta, the comfortable Dublin bourgeoisie, lives sentimentally, we find, in the West of Ireland and in the past, with the Lass of Aughrim and with the Lad of Oughterard, Michael Furey, both of them once passionate and both now dead. The Lass gave herself completely to a lord and died of it; Michael gave himself so completely to Gretta that HE died of it. So it seems that stories or fantasies about desperate passion **for** men of the ruling class or **in** men of the working class appeal to Gretta, a rather passionless woman of the middle class who has, like her mother-in-law again, sensibly chosen the less romantic but more comfortable life of the Dublin suburbs.

Lily, the youngest female in the story, is a malapert girl in her early teens who has been assigned, clearly against her will, to be a “porter”, that is door-opener and coat checker for the men coming to the party. Lily responds to Gabriel’s friendly small talk with adolescent impudence, flinging with impunity at a man the insolence that will not be tolerated by the women she serves: “the only thing they would not stand was back answers.” Gynarchy, monolithic in its dealings with men, tolerates no insubordination in its own ranks.

You men are all the same, declares the authoritative Lily. With teenage wisdom she puts Gabriel in the same category as Lord John Corley and Lenehan who have tricked one of her sisterhood, the young woman in *Two Gallants* who had tried to manipulate Corley in

the way described in that story.⁴

In spite of Lily's impertinence, Gabriel does not hold back his Christmas tip. She goes through the motions of refusing the money, but of course she does take it.

Molly Ivors too is a rude if more educated malcontent, starting an argument that had much better be conducted in the common room or dining room of the school or college where she and Gabriel seem to teach, instead of at a festive occasion where polite people avoid such behavior. She accuses him of being unpatriotic because he now writes book reviews for a mildly pro-English newspaper (as Joyce had done), and as the envious Ivors just as clearly has **not** been invited to do. Gabriel has little time for futile gestures of patriotism or romanticism. He is a family man, living for the present and the future not the past; he prefers to see himself as a European rather than an insular Irishman. He is concerned about his own health and that of his wife and children, rather than with the dead past of the Irish west.

Ivors, having decided to get his attention by nettling him in a situation where she knows the argument cannot really be pursued or properly answered, then plays the flirty game of turning off the discussion suddenly with the excuse "I was only joking," but resumes it at a whim, throwing in a compliment, but persisting in her cross-examination, and finishing off with the nasty taunt "West Briton." She then makes a point of going to Gabriel's wife behind his back and complaining that he'd "had words" with her. Having caused as much friction in one family as she reasonably can, she shortly thereafter announces her intention to leave the party abruptly without deigning to give a reason other than the condescending remark that "she had already overstayed her time."

The announcement of her departure will, she knows, force Gabriel to offer to see her home, an offer she will, of course, refuse. Snub number two. "Well, you're the comical

⁴ Lord John's genealogical connection with kitchen maids is meanderingly explained in the *Eumaeus* episode of *Ulysses* 16. 130 ff and 150 ff.) Gabriel Conroy's previous connection with servant girls, if any, is not mentioned anywhere.

girl,” remarks Gretta, substituting a charitable adjective for an accurate one like “boorish”, “ill-bred” or “spiteful”. Ivors gratifies her need to have the last word by declining to eat with everyone else, knowing that she will miss Gabriel's annual speech (snub number three), including this time, she intuits, the little jab at her that she has induced with her petty provocation. She knows the speech is predictable stuff, the kind of thing he has been doing every year for years. It is expected; he must do it, though he hates it and, in spite of all his practice, it makes him nervous. If he does not do it, his hostesses will be deeply hurt. It is a small but oppressive obligation, one of the fetters of being the intellectual male in the family, shown off as a captive trophy at gatherings like this one which are designed largely to impress the music students, and where he is required to pay tribute by saying insincere things graciously to flatter women. Ivors knows all this, but, again like many critics, she cannot resist the desire to put Gabriel down.

As the party is breaking up, Gabriel watches his wife standing on the stairs. Her stance, elegant and graceful, fills him with such admiration and desire that he wishes he were a painter and could capture that scene forever in a picture. He would call it “That’s My Old Duch(ess) Standing on the Stair.” And she would take as a compliment and laugh at his joking references to the wife of duke and dustman. But now she is too absorbed in the music to notice his admiring male gaze of which she is the *objet petit a*. He learns later to his dismay that all *she* wants to know is the name of that song coming from upstairs.

After the party Gabriel is finally alone with Gretta in the hotel room, a moment he has been looking forward to, as he is hardly ever alone with her. But his wife is totally insensitive to his emotional intensity, to his aching sexual desire for her, such a mixture of tenderness and sexual passion that he is barely able to restrain himself from seizing her in a crushing embrace. With a sexless, matronizing kiss she calls him "a good person" when the obvious phrase would have been "a good man", emasculating him without hesitation, with a petty malice so practiced as to be almost unconscious, denying his sexuality in one word. She follows this with a whole flood of words, one of the longer monologues in the story, in which her preference for the sexless dead is clear. She goes

on at length about an adolescent romance of sorts long ago with a boy, Michael Furey, who used to sing *The Lass of Aughrim*, the song she had heard at the party -- a boy who, she claims, gave his life for her.

Clearly, Michael Furey occupies the center of her own picture of "Distant Music" that Gretta has painted in her mind and had been gazing at as Gabriel looked at her admiringly on the stairs thinking mistakenly that she reciprocated his feelings of love. It is a painting from which Gabriel has been excluded by his wife as surely as he was excluded by his mother from the photo-portrait on the wall of his aunts' house. In the bedroom Gretta is so caught up in her word portrait of this dead suitor that she is unaware of the fact that her living lover is dying for her **now** -- passionately. A live husband, a good provider and concerned father, a man of intellect who is also a man of flesh and blood pulsing with desire, cannot win the attention of a woman with a Poe complex for a delicate dead boy from the gasworks who did not know enough to come in out of the rain. Husband Gabriel, the steady bourgeois, is the one whose work and position allow Gretta the comfort of nostalgia for an adolescent romantic passion. Gabriel is the one who has *really* given his life to her, and he is the one who pays for it literally and metaphorically. Gretta does not have to beg at anyone's door for herself or her child like the girl in *The Lass of Aughrim*; indeed she has access to a castle, somewhat less grand than that of Lord Gregory in the ballad, but just as full of light, good food and good cheer, the home of Gabriel's family. Unlike Lord Gregory's mother of the ballad, Gabriel's mother has not been allowed to prevail against her son's love for this "country cute" girl. Gabriel followed his romantic urge and married the woman he loved (and still loves), overruling his masterful mother to do so. He does not neglect any child he begat on his lover. Indeed, good bourgeois that he is, his concern for his children's health seems keener than that of his wife. His reward is to take second place to a ghost in her romantic life. Gretta, having cried her nostalgic fill, forgets the living Gabriel and falls asleep with her dead Michael.

As his wife sleeps with the dead, Gabriel slides into a conjugal bed made trebly cold with the frigidity of his wife, her ghost-lover, and the Dublin winter. More generous than Porphyria's lover in Browning's poem, he does not contemplate using Gretta's beautiful

rich bronze hair as the means to send her to join her Michael forever. That would be the end of another story.

3

Is this “Deveraux Development” a reasonable reading of the story ? Probably not, but it is a fairly coherent mis-reading. As an attempt to answer my original question it shows that you can give an intelligible biased interpretation to this text, and probably to almost ANY text, although it is less heavy-handed and ungenerous than many recent feminist or femaleist readings: there are, for example, no accusations of bribery, simony, oppression, sexual infidelity or violence.

The reading I have given is unacceptable because its focus is too vigilantly narrow, too mean, even with a fairly scrupulous meanness. Like its models, this reading displays a total unwillingness to see the whole narrative in a positive way, the most obvious way to see it. It is the product of a mind that has decided to be critical in only the derogatory sense; it selects the words and phrases that can bear the worst possible construction for the accused (what the female protagonist has become), and it finds the traces of other such words and phrases that remain under *erasure* for anyone else trying to read the *palimpsest*. It is sometimes plausible, inevitably, even though (or because) it is fairly scrupulous rather than totally wild, and it only sometimes invents outright what is not specifically in the text, like the source of Freddy’s sovereign or the title of Gabriel’s imagined painting, though I could claim that these are reasonable inferences.

More discreet than some of the critical pieces that it imitates, my biased reading turns failings into something short of crimes but more than imperfections. It is misogynistic without being rabid. It ignores certain words which are crucial to the tone of the passage in Joyce’s original. For example, in *my* reading which simply inverts the kind of misandrist criticism it echoes, it is Gretta who mocks Gabriel’s health-consciousness, as she does in the original story, but both criticisms conveniently and totally ignore the text’s statement in the original that Gretta breaks out into “a peal of *laughter*” at her

husband who looks at her “*with admiring and happy eyes ... The two aunts laughed heartily* too, for Gabriel’s solicitude was a standing *joke* with them.”

In addition, my reading, like the feminist readings, makes over-liberal use of pejorative words and expressions: Lily is *snotty*, the ambience constitutes a *matriarchy* or *gynarchy* that exercises *hegemony* as Gabriel knows *to his cost*; Gretta publicly *mocks* her husband, and *resents* him; she is an *unconcerned* mother who feels *rebuked* by his *interference in matriarchy* ; Gabriel has a small but *oppressive* obligation, one of the *fetters* of being the intellectual male in the family, *shown off like a trophy*. And so on.

Fault-finding and pejorative phrasing is the preferred critical mode. The reading of the last scene in the bedroom also has a heavily slanted vocabulary, but Gretta still ends up here better off than Gabriel in the hands of *his* detractors: my reading has no accusations of violent intentions, adultery, decapitation or murder.

So I repeat my own rhetorical question : Will this kind of criticism do? If literary criticism does not matter, then Yes, it will do fine. If criticism does matter, the answer is No, because the appraisal is hopelessly biased. It uses the story largely as a parable or *exemplum* to further the writer’s views. It is not enough to respond that the original author’s story exists only in a reading. True, perhaps, but surely not in **any** reading ; only in a responsible reading, a reading which responds to the story in ways that are not consistently and demonstrably biased. The kind of irresponsible interpretive writing I have been writing about is altogether too common. It is not legitimate literary criticism.

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of article