

Subversion and Containment in Female Images: A Study of “The Dead” From the Perspective of New Historicism

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ABSTRACT

James Joyce is one of the most famous writers in the field of literature and “The Dead” is the last part of his short stories collection, *Dubliners*. The novel centers on the protagonist, Gabriel and his confrontation with three main female characters, Lily, Miss Ivors and Gretta. This thesis focuses on the subversion and containment of female image creation in “The Dead” from the perspective of New Historicism. The first part of the thesis analyzes the conception of New Historicism from two parts, “historicity of text and textuality of history” and “the power paradigm of subversion and containment”. In the second part, it discusses the subversive power of three female images through their self awakening and confrontations with Gabriel. In the third part, it demonstrates the containment upon the subversive power of three female images through the conflict between the two power paradigm and characters’ embodiment of the Irish national identity. Through the analysis from the perspective view of New Historicism, the author finds out that despite the obvious subversive effect of female image creation in “The Dead,” James Joyce, unable to break away from the mainstream ideology at that time, still defended what he attacked in an invisible way.

Keywords: “The Dead,” female image, New Historicism, subversion and containment

1. INTRODUCTION

James Joyce is one of the most famous Irish writers in the 20th century in the field of literature. Joyce was born in a Roman Catholic family in Dublin. The Irish capital and the circumstances of his birth set the stage for the ethnic and religious elements of his literary creation later on. *Dubliners* is a collection composed of fifteen short stories, including the last one, “The Dead,” which is explored in this thesis. As the last part in the whole book, “The Dead” is the summary and sublimation of the theme.

Since the publication of *Dubliners*, it has been attracting much attention and has been translated into all kinds of languages around the world. As for the analysis on *The Dubliners* and “The Dead,” commentators and scholars have different opinions on its interpretation and demonstrate it from various angles. And more and more scholars have turned their eyes into the perspective of New Historicism and female image. Such as in Munich’s “Form and Subtext in Joyce’s ‘The Dead’ ”, 1984, he explored the national image with the characters

in “The Dead.” “Gabriel is the sort of person that Joyce himself might have been had he not left Ireland.”^[1] In 1949, “James Joyce’s Epiphanies” written by Prescott pointed out that “Significant of Joyce’s continued appreciation of epiphanies is the following observation...Joyce probably learned the meaning of epiphany as an aside in his Latin class...”^[2] In Brendan’s “Structural Symbol in Joyce’s ‘The Dead’ ” of 1957, he analyzed the vital symbol of galoshes as “...the significance of Gabriel’s galoshes into the symbolic key to his tragic position between his wife and the ghost of his mother.”^[3] What’s more, he pointed that the class consciousness was existing in the novel and different people had their own personalities which could matched with their class. Actually, he has tried to discuss the plot from the perspective of historical influence. In Spinks’s “Life and Contexts” published in 2009, he extended the experience of James Joyce and connected his growing with his literature creation. In this article, it is clear to get the information of several different stages of Joyce, which is able to help better analyze details in the text.^[4] In the book *The Review of Politics* written by Kelleher in 1965, the author gave a

comprehensive extension of Irish history and mythology in Joy's "The Dead."^[5] It is a new point of view which can be combined with the Irish nation to explore the hidden meaning in the novel.

Although there are many books and articles about "The Dead," the comments on the female image creation from the perspective of New Historicism can hardly be found. Most of the articles focus on the analysis of the male character, Gabriel and the connection between Gabriel and other female characters. The focus is on the man. A few of them talk about the female images from the perspective of Irish history. Actually, to have a more comprehensive understanding of the text, the perspective of female images is indispensable. As for this thesis, it is creative to focus on the female perspective and to explore the text on the basis of the core theory of New Historicism, subversion and containment, which is a further sense based on previous studies. On the one hand, it will try to analyze the subversive power of three female images, Lily, Miss Ivors and Gretta, through their self awakening and confrontations with the protagonist, Gabriel. On the other hand, it will also attempt to make a sense of the containment which is the counterweight to the subversion through the analysis of the conflict between two power paradigm and characters' embodiment of the Irish national identity and history background.

2. AN OVERVIEW OF NEW HISTORICISM

New Historicism, as a new genre of the theory of literary criticism emerged in the United States in the late 1970s and early 1980s, arousing a rethinking of literary text and history. Compared with Old Historicism, New Historicism is a rebellion against formalism. It refers to "the historical circumstances and the literary texts are equally significant, for text and historical circumstances are mutually constitutive: they create each other...literary texts shape and are shaped by their historical context."^[6] It advocates the relevance between literature and society which means literature is made by society and also influences the society. On the other hand, it revolts against the objectivity, totality and purpose of history which are proposed by Old Historicism. On the contrary, it agrees with the interpretive, dynamic and constructive nature of history. Since there is a wealth of female character descriptions in the text of "The Dead," this thesis can analyze the connection of text and history in image creation from the perspective of New Historicism.

2.1. Textuality of History and Historicity of Text

In addition to Hayden White and Stephen Greenblatt, Louis A. Montrose who is one of the crucial representatives of New Historicism puts forward a more comprehensive definition of "textuality of history" and

"historicity of text" in the theory of New Historicism.

Textuality of history lays stress on two sides. Firstly, without preserved texts, one cannot understand the true and complete past of a society. Secondly, these texts themselves will once again serve as a medium for textual interpretation when they are transformed into documents and become the basis for historians to write history.^[7] In other words, textuality of history means that as people cannot have the original history, the latecomers can only use the recorded and handed down text to understand history. In addition, the record itself is the result of choice, retention and abandonment. Once the researchers regard these records as historical archives, they will make further adjustments and changes in the description and interpretation of historical events. As a result, the history of the non-textualized form, which is originally unique and unending, has evolved into the histories.

With respect to historicity of texts, the concept has been proposed by Montrose in 1989:

"By the 'History of Texts', I mean to suggest the cultural specificity, the social embedment of all modes of writing not only the text that critics study but also the texts in which they study them."^[7]

With regard to historicity of texts, it focuses on the historical facts. The historicity of texts emphasizes that literary text reflects the social, historical, cultural, political, class, gender and so on. In addition, the concept of "history" should be plural history which is composed of countless lower-case histories. As a result, the text must be the product of a specific and social environment. Furthermore, the historical and social attributes of the text is of certain positive significance for the discussion of social norms, values and ethics. On the other hand, the interpretation of the text is not purely objective, undoubtedly with a certain social history and the interpretation in the specific historical society will be engraved with the imprint of that era.

2.2. Power Paradigm of Subversion and Containment

Subversion and containment are two main concepts in the theory of New Historicism which has a comprehensive connotation and ranges over many aspects. They are proposed in the essay "Invisible Bullets" written by Stephen Greenblatt.

In Greenblatt's perspective of view, subversion is author's conscious resistance to the mainstream culture and its ideology, while containment reflects the inevitable guiding role of the mainstream ideology to the author.^[8] In addition, in order to maintain the durability of its power, any political and cultural system actually allows the existence of subversive elements to some extent, which is to more effectively curb the

challenge to the existing order. In literary works, the individual resistance exists. But there is always the process of such resistance being used by the power mechanism or recruited.^[9] Subversive voices are implicit in the text, but they are often suppressed by mainstream ideology or certain authorities. The reason is that subversion is identified through the authority consciousness and mainstream consciousness. As the counterpart of the sense of authority, the subversive factors are just regarded as the products of the mainstream discourse of the society or the authority itself.

In a word, subversion refers to the defection of social ideology and power which represent the ruling order, while containment means to control the obvious subversive force within the permission of authority consciousness or mainstream discourse so that the subversion cannot make any substantial effect.

3. SUBVERSION OF FEMALE IMAGES IN “THE DEAD”

When James Joyce wrote *Dubliners*, the collection of short stories, the first women’s movement in the west was in full swing. It also influenced his portrayal of three main female images in “The Dead.” In the novel, Joyce presents readers with three-dimensional, complex and diversified female images. They come from different social backgrounds: Gretta, a traditional housewife; Lily, a lower class from the bottom of society; Molly, a nationalist intellectual. In addition, the image creation of these three female characters, both in length and depth, is no less than that of the protagonist Gabriel. With careful analysis, the three female characters have completed the transmutation from silence to awakening, from edge to center, from repression to subversion in different aspects. Besides the awakening of self-consciousness, their confrontation with Gabriel can also reflect the subversion.

3.1. Subversion in the Image of Lily

The first female character in the story was Lily, the caretaker’s daughter. She was busy with the annual festival ball of the Misses Morkan. She greeted the guests, set the tableware and arranged the dance in an orderly manner. Although she was born in the lower class, she was not useless and submissive. When Gabriel took it for granted that she was about to get married and gaily asked her when the wedding would be held, Lily replied him “The men that is now is only all palaver and what they can get out of you.”^[10] In the face of a man whose status was above her, it was difficult for an assistant girl to express her disappointment and dissatisfaction rather than pandering and flattery. Lily, as a young woman growing up in the lower class, however, did it. Such an answer indicated that she had

independent thinking and judgment with a clear understanding of the weaknesses and defects of men. Through the awakening of self-consciousness, there is the subversion in the image creation of Lily.

The confrontation between Lily and Gabriel is revealed in the details of dialogue and behaviors. Lily was at the bottom of Irish society. She was innocent but abandoned after she became pregnant and being cheated by a man. When Gabriel chatted with Lily at the door and got Lily’s bitter reply about men, there was something uneasy in his heart. In Gabriel’s view, the life of a young girl would be with marriage combined with love. Lily’s words, however, negated his assumption and got to know that girls like Lily had more misfortune and betrayal. Besides, it also made him realize that men were not the perfect gods of women. Once the veil of hypocrisy was lifted, the myth of male power was like ice in the sun, which inevitable melted. Then, out of sympathy, Gabriel quickly took out a coin from his pocket and stuffed it to Lily, which was rejected by her. This act, apart from showing Gabriel’s absolute advantage in front of Lily as a highly educated professor, did not gain Lily’s gratitude but rather made the distance from each other. In their confrontation, Gabriel’s pride as a gentleman of the upper class was hit by the subversive consciousness of Lily, a woman from the lower class.

3.2. Subversion in the Image of Ivors

The second main female character was Miss Ivors full of activism and assertiveness. Whether dress, behavior or education, she distinguished herself from traditional family women. She did not wear a low-cut bodice worn by others but “the large brooch which was fixed in the front of her collar bore on it an Irish device.”^[10] In the image creation of Miss Ivors, Joyce broke the stereotype of the character’s biological gender in the society at that time and overturned the traditional gender interpretation. In other words, men were generally considered active, dominant, adventurous, rational and creative; women, contrary to these traits, were passive, submissive, sensual and conformist.^[11] Miss Ivors had a clear position on national politics and even had a similar educational background and professional status with Gabriel. She was maverick and confident, beyond the limits of biological sex at that time and had a subversive significance in the novel.

Through the confrontation between Miss Ivors and Gabriel, the subversion in the image of Ivors could also be found. When she talked with Gabriel, she was not willing to show any weakness and was even aggressive by putting forward her own opinions directly. She accused Gabriel of writing for *The Daily Express*, satirized him as the *West Briton*, heckled and teased him in front of the crowd. Although Gabriel wanted to defend himself, he finally made a silent compromise

facing the powerful aura of Miss Ivors. Soon, they had a second conflict. When they discussed the choice of holiday resort, Miss Ivors strongly suggested Gabriel going to the Aran Isles to enjoy the scenery of the motherland. Gabriel, however, refused directly, which hurt her national enthusiasm. This time, under aggressive questioning of Miss Ivors, Gabriel was enraged and blurted out “I am sick of my own country, sick of it!”^[10] As a man who had an advantage in the field of career, the emotion of Gabriel was controlled by Miss Ivors. Even her taunting prevented him from dancing, laughing and speaking comfortably. “It unnerved him to think that she would be at the supper table, looking up at him while he spoke with her critical quizzing eyes.”^[10] The image creation of Miss Ivors is the subversion of Joyce’s portrayal of female characters, revealing his reflection on the relationship between men and women and his thinking on female consciousness.

3.3. Subversion in the Image of Gretta

The last part of the novel focused on the image of Gretta, the wife of Gabriel. In the first two parts, Joyce showed a very soft and low-profile image of Gretta, which had attracted no attention of readers as she was a woman who was not as cynical as Lily and not as assertive as Miss Ivors. Her humble birth, effeminate appearance and weak personality all made the image dispensable. In addition, Gabriel subconsciously recognized her as his own property, both physically and mentally depending on him. A song called *The Last of Aughrim* awakened the emotional sustenance of Gretta’s inner self, which had a vital significance to reveal that she was still an independent individual with her own spiritually pure land. She lived not only as the wife of Gabriel, but also as a living human being with her own emotional and inner sustenance. Through describing her unexpected rich inner world, Joyce overturned the traditional image of Gretta.

The subversion in the image of Gretta could also be reflected by the confrontation with Gabriel. The song *Gretta* heard at the end of the party filled her with sad memories of the deceased lover, Machael Furey. As a result, she reacted indifferent to Gabriel’s intimate behavior. When she told Gabriel about her former love affair and emotions that had been buried deeply inside her, he realized that his wife had her own thoughts about love and life, not just a housewife attached to the man. Till now, he was confident enough because he was a college professor. Therefore, he deliberately asked Gretta about Machael’s profession to try making her realize the gap between them by demeaning the lover of his wife. Unexpectedly, Gretta did not care and told him that Machael was in the gasworks. In her perspective of view, his profession was no different from that of her husband. Then, when Gretta told Gabriel unconcealedly that Machael had died for her, Gabriel collapsed.

“Gabriel felt humiliated by the failure of his irony and by the evocation of this figure from the dead, a boy in the gasworks.”^[10] At this moment, as her husband, he realized that he had never really known Gretta. From the epiphany of Gabriel, it also revealed the subversion in the image creation of Gretta.

4. CONTAINMENT OF FEMALE IMAGES IN “THE DEAD”

Joyce was at the height of the first women’s liberation movement. Therefore, the female images in his works could not be the absolute object of silence and numbness. Although the three characters could reflect subversive points in their images, James Joyce, however, unable to break away from the mainstream ideology at that time, still defended what he attacked in an invisible way. It seemed that the three female characters achieved subversion to some extent. In fact, however, their subversion would be purged in the process of containment. The subversive power was contained not only by their own limitations, but also by their embodiment of Irish national identity which reflected the historical background.

4.1. Containment in the Image of Lily

The novel began with a description of Lily’s busy actions. When Gabriel asked Lily if she was still at school, she replied naturally that she had dropped out of school. Because of the solidified hierarchical rules and awareness, Lily could not cross the class just as she could not go to school and was forced to leave there at such young age to continue living as the underclass and doing what her father had done. From the detail, readers could find that Lily was despised and Gabriel had biased views on her. The hint was given when Gabriel smiled at “the three syllables she had given his surname and glanced at her.”^[10] Lily intruded a vowel in his name, not Mr. Conroy, but Mr. Connery, which indicated the low-educated and lower class Irish accent. And she was sympathized by Gabriel who belonged to the upper class and accepted the coin in the end. Therefore, although Lily had an independent critical view of men and consciously complained about the tragic events that had happened to her directly in front of Gabriel, she had illusions about men and still lacked of class resistance consciousness, as she ended the confrontation in a compromise with Gabriel and accepted the money. All her subversive awareness was contained by the solidified ideology when she unconsciously accepted the consequence such as the money given by Gabriel, the result that she could not study anymore and the self tragedy caused by men. It is obviously that there was the strict hierarchical ideology and the containment of her subversion in her mind.

There were many hints of Irish national identity and

consciousness in the novel. To some extent, in the perspective of Joyce's view, Irish history was the history of being cheated and betrayed which was reflected in Lily's tragedy of being deceived by men. Lily's image creation was influenced by the Irish national identity and in turn, her experience suggested the Irish history of bullying and betrayal. When Joyce was nine years old, Parnell, the national hero of Ireland, was betrayed by a group of power-grabbing villains, which prevented the process of national liberation of Ireland. As a result, Joyce had a strong resistance to deception and betrayal. In addition, he expressed his views that Ireland would be betrayed whenever it was at a crucial juncture in its process of history and that there was no hope of success in the cause of its national liberation without the complete eradication of the nation's inferiority.^[12] Joyce's hatred of betrayal was reflected in Lily's resentment of men. Besides, a crucial origin of Lily's personality came from the embodiment of Irish national identity. The Irish nation's resentment of the English nation and its own national rebels had been deeply imprinted in its national identity, as if something had been preventing the Irish nation's healing.^[13] The Irish always kept their hatred in mind and broke out easily. Therefore Lily actually embodied the national identity. Her assessment of men was blind because in her perspective of view, all men were classified as liars. Besides, her resentment lacks of rational consideration and without comprehensive reflection on the relationship between men and women, which exposed the containment. Her embodiment of Irish national identity could reflect the unconscious containment of her subversion.

4.2. Containment in the Image of Ivors

In contrast to Lily's image, Miss Ivors was a radical nationalist who broke through the traditional female image. She always insisted on looking at issues from a national point of view, without any "unpatriotic" behavior and "non-nationalist" dissidents. "O, innocent Amy! I have found out that you write for The Daily Express. Now, aren't you ashamed of yourself?" "Well, I'm ashamed of you, said Miss Ivors frankly. To say you'd write for a rag like that. I didn't think you were a West Briton."^[10] She was aggressive and satirized Gabriel's behavior unlike that of the Irish. In addition, she accused him of not being nationalized in his articles for The Daily Express. Dancing with Gabriel, she denounced him as a "West Briton" who knew nothing about his own language, country, people and land. She attacked him for having no sense of national responsibility and unwilling to know more about his own country, culture and language, but willing to spend his annual vacation in France and Belgium. These actions and utterance showed her very strong

characteristics, but revealed her hypocrisy and extreme hidden in the nationalist identity. When Gabriel tried to explain his views, Miss Ivors chose to avoid communicating. As a result, Gabriel was unwilling to talk to her on the nation topic efficiently as neither side understood each other and tried truly interaction. "He did not know how to meet her charge. He wanted to say that literature was above politics."^[10] Miss Ivors' radical nationalism reflected that she was not a true nationalist, which was the containment of her subversion.

In her perspective of view, she had made a huge contribution to the great cause of the nation. In fact, however, she was only doing superficial work, boasting all the time and not allowing for any non-radical sounds and deeds. If one sincerely wanted to promote the development of national culture and tradition, he or she would be willing to listen to different voices so that it was better for solving the problems and eliminating the gap. However, Miss Ivors took a radical way to blame others and refused the communication, which actually led to misunderstanding between people with different ideas and made it more difficult to unite national forces to truly push the nation to develop and liberate.

In the perspective of Joyce, some alleged patriotic writers were so shortsighted that they completely ignored the basic laws of literary creation and only emphasized Ireland from the political standard in order to maintain their national pride, which not only exaggerated the merits of Irish nation, but also covered up its weakness which was needed to be revealed and changed. Joyce firmly believed that having revolution from the spirit was the best way to save the nation and expose the root of the nation, rather than shouting patriotic slogans all the time like Miss Ivors. Patriotism did not mean to just praise for country. If Ireland wanted to keep pace with other European countries, artists were supposed to be given the freedom.^[14] From the confrontation between Miss Ivors and Gabriel on the topic of literature and politics, the containment of Miss Ivors' subversion could be reflected. And her embodiment of the Irish national identity actually contains the subversion.

4.3. Containment in the Image of Gretta

Gretta was the crucial character in the novel and the relevant plot was concentrated in the second part. She was kind and generous. Although she had never really loved her husband, Gabriel, since marriage because she had been in love with a young boy who had been dead for many years, she still ostensibly obeyed her husband and never publicly accused or complained about him, which showed the servility feature of Gretta. The Irish nation was the only one in Western Europe which had been under the colonial rule for a long time. From the 12th century to the 19th century, Ireland was invaded.

Although it kept resisting, it never got rid of the rule of the British Empire. In its long history of slavery, oppression and contempt, the Irish nation had developed the inclusive and mothering character, which was reflected on the image creation of Gretta. There were details in the novel, which could analyze the conservatism of Gretta. She was reluctant to accept new things, especially foreign ones. To illustrate this feature, Joyce used the symbol of galoshes.

“—Galoshes! Said Mrs. Conroy. That’ s the latest. Whenever it’ s wet underfoot I must put on my galoshes. Tonight even he wanted me to put them on, but I wouldn’ t. The next thing he’ ll buy me will be a diving suit.

—And what are galoshes, Gabriel?

—Galoshes, Julia! Exclaimed her sister. Goodness me, don’ t you know what galoshes are? You wear them over your...over your boots, Gretta, isn’ t it?

Gabriel knitted his brows and said, as if he were slightly angered:

—It’ s nothing very wonderful but Gretta thinks it very funny because she says the word reminds her of Christy Minstrels.” ^[10]

Gabriel was a fashionable man and ready to embrace the new things. Therefore he bought two pairs of galoshes from continental Europe for Gretta and himself. Gretta, however, did not accept it and laughed. She complained to aunt that Gabriel wanted her to put on it tonight because it was rainy, but she refused with a proud sense. From here, actually she understood the use of galoshes but did not admit its merits and still adhered to the old-fashioned ideas, unwilling to try and accept the new things. In other words, she was obsessed with past habits, thoughts, memories and life, which could explain the reason why she still remembered the boy. Her emotional sustenance of the inner self was formed not by independent thought, but by a conservative inertia.

In a word, on the one hand, she had the characteristics of numbness, submissiveness and endurance in the face of powerful man; on the other hand, she stuck to the tradition, rejected new things and kept a habit of conservative thinking. These features were also embodied on the national identity. It inferred that Irish nation was insensitive and submissive facing the foreign colonial force. At the same time, however, it still maintained the state and did not try changing it. Therefore, the containment of her subversion could be exposed.

5. CONCLUSION

“The Dead” is the last story in James Joyce’ s collection of short stories, *Dubliners*, and is also one of

the most famous short stories in the field of literature in the 20th century. It is a simple story that can be divided into two sections. The first part is about the annual Christmas party and the second part is about the interaction of emotion between the male protagonist, Gabriel, and the female protagonist, Gretta. Besides Gretta, there are two other female images in “The Dead,” Lily and Miss Ivors. These three main female characters are completely different in personality and background. In addition, they appear in sequence in the plot of the novel, from the beginning to the middle to the end, which structures the whole novel. Joyce was at the height of the first women’ s liberation movement at that time, so the female characters in his writing could not be absolute objects of silence and numbness. Women of that time were in deep oppression but they were no longer submissive. The female awareness had begun to awaken. They began to fight against the patriarchal society of the time, they began to strive for freedom and equality and they began to pursue their own happiness. In “The Dead,” Lily, Miss Ivors and Gretta express their subversive self-consciousness and issue their own demands in different ways. Besides self awakening, their subversion can be reflected through their confrontations with the protagonist, Gabriel. Joyce’ s purpose in shaping these female images, however, is not to praise or belittle women or to claim their rights, but to reflect on the relationship between men and women, ethnic conflicts, religious issues and national consideration. In addition, it is to enlighten readers and make them spiritual awakening. And despite the obvious subversive effect of female image creation in “The Dead,” James Joyce, unable to break away from the mainstream ideology at that time, still defends what he attacks in an invisible way. Therefore there is containment upon each female character. And the embodiment of Irish national identity on the three female characters also contains their subversion and reveals the limitations in an unconscious way.

This thesis explores the subversion and containment of female image creation in “The Dead” from the perspective of New Historicism. Through analyzing the three main female characters from the view of subversion and containment, we can have a more comprehensive understanding towards the text and ponder our own life from the dialectical perspective, which ascend to the connection among history, society and each individual.

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