Clarity and Obscurity in James Joyce and Italo Svevo: The Theme of Maturation and Development in ‘The Dead’ and *Una vita*

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This essay will explore the theme of maturation and development in Joyce’s ‘The Dead’, the last and best known short story in *Dubliners*, and Svevo’s *Una vita*, his first novel. Both ‘The Dead’ and *Una vita* have often been characterised as stories of progress and development.

Gabriel Conroy, the central figure of Joyce’s text, undergoes a process of personal maturation as he faces a transforming insight into his life. As he and his wife Gretta leave the annual Christmas dance organized by his elderly aunts, Gabriel learns that in her youth his wife was in love with another man who died of love for her. In analysing Gabriel Conroy, critics often point out that he is a self-centred character living in a world built on his cherished sense of superiority. This world is threatened in the final moment of his enlightenment. Gabriel is the favourite nephew of his aunts and his role at the traditional Christmas dinner, around which the story revolves, is crucial: he delivers a speech. He sees himself superior because of his education: as an intellectual and a college teacher he feels different from those surrounding him. By contrast, other critics emphasise Gabriel’s insecurity and lack of confidence.

On the other hand, Alfonso Nitti, the protagonist of Svevo’s *Una vita*, is considered to be an extremely weak character. Alfonso is a provincial young man who decides to leave his village in order to make a new start in the city. Two urban contexts play the most important role in the initiation process: the Maller bank, at which he is employed, and the Maller family, where he meets Annetta Maller, whom he almost marries and through whom he might have entered upper class society.
These two frameworks, which both contrast the reality of the city with the idyllic world of his native village, are oppressive and alienating: the job at the bank is dull; Annetta, who has literary ambitions, chooses Alfonso to write a novel with her and becomes his lover, but marries her cousin Macario in the end. Alfonso’s vision of the world becomes pervasively dark and gloomy. Indeed, as he reaches the ultimate insights into his existence, he commits suicide. Critics usually point out that in creating Alfonso, Svevo was influenced by Schopenhauer's pessimistic view of the world and by Darwin's idea that it is necessary to struggle in order to survive.

In contrast to the often rather monolithic readings of these characters and their ‘development’, I would like to suggest that the maturation of the main characters in ‘The Dead’ and Una vita is not marked by one prevailing feeling – either of aloofness or of personal worthlessness – but can rather be perceived as a mingling of the two opposing states of mind. Both Gabriel and Alfonso experience a constant alternation of feelings of superiority and inferiority. My initial hypothesis is that the sense of superiority produces self-awareness and clarity of vision, whereas the feeling of inferiority provokes negative emotions of worthlessness which bring about a lack of perspective and obscurity of meaning. It is my contention that a comparative study of the two writers brings out this dialectic particularly acutely. The final epiphanies of the two protagonists indicate that, in the case of both writers, clarity does not exist without obscurity.

The essay does not aim to suggest that the two texts can be read exclusively as stories of the maturation and development of the two protagonists. Both stories are built on a number of binary oppositions. Gabriel’s education is contrasted with the ignorance of the audience which listens to his speech; the warmth of Misses Morkan’s house contrasts with the coldness of the evening; the old generation represented by Gabriel’s old aunts differs from the new one; the world of the dead is opposed to the world of the living. Similarly, Una vita juxtaposes the reality of the
city and the idyllic world of Alfonso’s native village. Moreover, the Maller bank differs from the Maller house. These oppositions in the two stories articulate different textual layers. By following the development of the two protagonists – and it can be perceived as a constant interchange of feelings of superiority and inferiority -- the essay will focus on this single textual aspect.

In the case of Joyce’s Gabriel Conroy, we are invited to follow his struggle with the opposing feelings of aloofness and lack of self worth from the very beginning. His personal integrity is threatened as soon as he arrives at the dinner. He meets Lily, the caretaker’s daughter, and upsets her by mentioning playfully the possibility of her marriage. After Lily’s bitter answer that “the men that is now is all palaver and what they can get out of you”\(^1\), Gabriel colours: he is embarrassed and confused. As Benstock points out, after his first inappropriate remark to Lily, Gabriel “never recovers his equilibrium”.\(^2\) Indeed, in the following sentence we read that the event “had cast a gloom over him which he tried to dispel by arranging his cuffs and bows of his tie”.\(^3\) Lily’s bitterness provokes Gabriel's gloomy thoughts. He tries to look elegant, as if to hide how disturbed and disoriented he is. The attempt to look elegant after his awkward remark suggests, moreover, that Gabriel's personal world is built on precision and order. His very appearance reflects this: his lenses are polished, his hair is glossy. Whenever his cosmos is disturbed, Gabriel feels insecure and tries to re-establish it.

The thought of the speech, which succeeds the act of arranging his tie, is a clear indication of Gabriel’s desperate attempt to replace his feelings of confusion and personal inferiority by the contrasting and comforting sense of aloofness. In following his thoughts further, we learn that his initial wish was to include lines by Browning in

\(^{3}\) Joyce, pp. 140-141.
the speech. Gabriel’s wish to quote intellectually demanding verses to an audience that would hardly understand them represents his endeavour to assert his personal world by stressing his superior knowledge and education. Yet, after the awkward behaviour towards Lily, he feels that “he would fail with [the audience] as he had failed with the girl in the pantry.” The thought of the speech cannot bring back his sense of intellectual superiority; it cannot produce a clear vision. Lily’s bitter retort has crushed Gabriel’s little world. He feels that by quoting poetry he can only make himself ridiculous. This thought does not reflect only Gabriel’s insecurity but it also shows that he is extremely concerned about social recognition. He wants his speech to be successful; not only does he cherish his sense of superiority, but he also has a social position – he is a college teacher. The need to gain social recognition seems to have been rooted in his relationship with his mother. We learn that Gabriel’s mother was ‘serious’ and ‘matronly’. She chose the names of her sons; thanks to her Gabriel took his degree in the Royal University. She represented the brains of the family and cherished its dignity. Gabriel is afraid of seeming ridiculous not only because his personal integrity can easily be threatened but also because his dead mother, the embodiment of seriousness and authority, still inhabits the world of the living. By appearing ridiculous he would deny the values his mother represented.

In the constant interchange of the opposing feelings of humility and superiority, the gloomy course of his thoughts alters again as his aunts come out of the ladies’ dressing rooms and kiss him. The following sentences reflect that he has a clear and affirmed vision both of himself and of his world: “No, said Gabriel, […] we had quite enough of that last year […]. But as for Gretta there […] she’d walk home in the snow if she were let.” He does not let his wife walk home in the cold; he is capable of controlling his little cosmos. However, immediately after this remark,

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4 Joyce, p. 141.
5 Joyce, p. 141. The emphasis is mine.
Gabriel’s feeling of power is shaken again albeit through a joke: “Galoshes! [...] Tonight even he wanted me to put them on [...]. The next thing he’ll buy me will be a diving suit.”6 As Gretta and his aunts make fun of galoshes, Gabriel’s personality starts to fray. Galoshes themselves suggest a need for protection not only against the cold weather but also against the world outside. In order to calm down, he pats “his tie reassuringly.”7 He repeats the same gesture that he had made several minutes earlier when, discouraged by Lily, he patted his tie in the attempt to look elegant and undisturbed.

Gabriel’s feeling of power is strongly shaken again as Miss Ivors accuses him of writing literary reviews for a British newspaper and of being a ‘West Briton’. Unlike Miss Ivors, his fellow teacher and the embodiment of Irish nationalism, which opposes British colonial rule by celebrating the Irish past, Gabriel is interested in the customs and languages of the continent. He believes that literature comes before politics.8 Yet, he never says this to Miss Ivors. After her ironic remarks, he can only retire to the “remote corner of the room where Freddy Malins’ mother [is] sitting”.9 This shows that Miss Ivors has disturbed him even more profoundly: she has blurred his clear vision which is built on his cherished sense of personal and social superiority. Once again he is afraid of appearing ridiculous before his own people. He will try to regain his dignity by distancing himself. The images of solitary walks in the snow, which succeed his withdrawal to the back of the room, reflect his need for isolation. Gabriel thinks: “How much more pleasant it would be there [outside] than at the

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6 Joyce, p. 142.
7 Joyce, p. 142.
8 Critics often point out that Gabriel resembles James Joyce. He is a literary man and a college teacher and like Joyce, he is not keen to share the sympathy with the Irish nationalistic aspirations. (See, for example, Anthony Burgess, Here Comes Everybody: An Introduction to James Joyce for the Ordinary Reader (London: Faber, 1965), p. 43.) Joyce left Ireland and never supported the Irish cultural revival.
9 Joyce, p. 149.
He dreams of solitary walks in the snow; the coldness of the snow seems to be more comforting than the unpleasant remarks made by Miss Ivors.

Amid his mental swirl, his thoughts turn to his speech: it makes him the central figure of the evening. Even though the dominant critical view usually stresses Gabriel’s confusion in relation to his speech, in this constant interchange of inferiority and superiority, clarity and obscurity, the text that he intends to present seems to bring back his confidence. Gabriel tries to fill it with singularity: even though the speech is dedicated primarily to Irish hospitality and the warmth of his aunts, it betrays the marks of Gabriel’s knowledge: he compares his aunts to the Three Graces. The very emphasis on hospitality, on the other hand, serves the end of offering a comforting mental response to Miss Ivors. Gabriel intends to allude to her in his speech through the idea that the new and educated generations lack the qualities that the past ones possessed. Although he feels embarrassment and confusion once again as Miss Ivors leaves before the dinner begins, certainty and determination seem to dominate Gabriel’s world as he thinks about his possible answer to her: “Very good: this was one for Miss Ivors. What did he care that his aunts were only two ignorant women?”

The speech that Gabriel delivers is fluent. The sentences are not broken or elliptical. They do not suggest confusion or the impossibility of controlling the world and the self, but rather the certainty of the speaker. This sense of harmony will bring him images which promise to reinforce his subjectivity. This is why on seeing his wife standing at the staircase and listening to a song, Gabriel transforms her into an image: “If he were a painter he would paint her in that attitude.” The speaker, whose fingers were trembling as he was about to give a speech, imagines himself as an artist now. However, the fact that he sees in Gretta a symbol of something superior does

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10 Joyce, p. 151
11 Joyce, p. 151.
12 Joyce, p. 165.
not only show that Gabriel has an artistic perception of his wife but it also reduces her to a mere sign depriving her of personality. Moreover, his perception shows that, as Johnson has put it, Gabriel’s “aesthetic sensibility rises not much higher than a level of kitsch”.13 Thus the notion of aloofness is immediately undercut by bathos. The symbol which he would like to paint would be nothing other than a sentimental banality. Nonetheless, with his artistic vision Gabriel feels confident and superior.

Feeling superior and having a distinct perception of himself, he is overwhelmed with sudden desire for his wife. As she kisses him when they come to the hotel room, he is brimming over with happiness: “Just as he was wishing for it she had come to him of her own accord. Perhaps her thoughts were running with his. Perhaps she had felt the impetuous desire that was in him and then the yielding mood had come upon her.”14 These two sentences represent Gabriel’s physical desire for his wife. While, on one hand, in his self-absorption and possessiveness, Gabriel perceives his wife’s wishes and desires as running in accordance with his, on the other hand, the ‘perhaps’ of the two sentences excludes his absolute feeling of superiority even at this moment. It alludes once again to a hidden sense of personal insecurity suggesting that his views will be obscured once again.

Indeed, Gabriel will soon touch the opposite emotional pole. After he has heard that Michael Furey died of love for Gretta, his feelings are transformed into a powerful sense of inferiority which terrifies him and obscures his vision: “…some impalpable and vindictive being was coming gathering forces against him in its vague world.”15 His thoughts turn to his wife. The importance that Michael Furey still has in Gretta’s life crushes Gabriel’s illusions: “Generous tears filled Gabriel’s eyes.”16 Comparing himself to Michael Furey, he starts pondering his own feelings: “He had

14 Joyce, p. 172. The emphasis is mine.
15 Joyce, p. 174.
16 Joyce, p. 176.
never felt like that himself towards any woman but he knew that such a feeling must be love.” Critics often point out that these final sentences represent the achievement of Gabriel's self-knowledge. As he gains a transforming insight into his life, his feelings of superiority seem to give way definitely to a consciousness of inferiority and inadequacy. However, we have to discern Joyce’s irony here. Even Gabriel’s negative self-knowledge, which he gains at the end, can be perceived as flawed. He perhaps dramatises his own lack of feeling just as excessively as he previously dramatised the certainty of his love towards Gretta. The extreme soundness and certainty of ‘he knew’ could be read as connoting Gabriel’s humble self-knowledge as much as his self-dramatisation. Even in the abyss of self-doubt, Gabriel gains his gratification. It remains unclear what he has ‘discerned’. The use of the modal must implies this relativity.

Symbolically, the story ends with the image of “the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead”. Critics often link this final image with Gabriel’s future life. In this sense, the snow falling through the universe can be read as symbolizing death as well as a new and purifying experience which might bring rebirth and regenerated life to Joyce’s protagonist. Sometimes, the snow is read as representing Gabriel’s final union with the world: through the vision that he has reached he has finally joined humanity.

17 Joyce, p. 176. The emphasis is mine.
18 Kelly has pointed out that Joyce’s protagonist does not react excessively only at these final moments, but all through the story; he always “finds it difficult to act with emotional spontaneity.” (John S. Kelly, 'Afterward' in James Joyce, Dubliners (New York: Vintage books, 1993), p. 270). He overreacts as he gives money to Lily at the beginning of the story; the tip is an excessive compensation for his mistake with her. His reaction to Miss Ivors is also excessive; he cannot bear her teasing. After he has heard of Michael Furey, he feels ludicrous as a person. This feeling can also be seen as overcompensation, which is typical of him, and not, as many critics suggest, as an “authentic insight […] into his true position.” (Kelly, p. 274).
19 Joyce, p. 176.
20 Kelly stresses that no matter in what direction Gabriel’s life will go in the future and what his final insight will bring to him, his epiphany is positive because Joyce’s protagonist can go beyond his constant ‘restlessness’ and insecurity only as he starts thinking about the absolutes of life and death. It is only
The whiteness of the snow, at this final moment, also indicates the utmost clarity. Indeed, if Gabriel’s epiphany is to be read as the achievement of his negative self-knowledge, then Joyce’s protagonist realizes, and his vision seems to be particularly sharp now, that the perception of his relationship with Gretta was wrong. As the clarity of vision brings a transforming knowledge which is negative in meaning, the brightness of the snow is contrasted with the gloom of his insight.

On the other hand, if we are to argue that it remains unclear what Gabriel has ‘discerned’, the universality and the stillness of the snow falling through the universe suggest that in the larger scheme of things the insight that Gabriel has reached is insignificant. Joyce is being ironic about the human condition here: it can easily be crushed against the universal pattern of all the living and the dead. He suggests that, at the personal level, absolute self-knowledge is impossible, and, at the universal level, it is insignificant. In this sense, the brightness of the snow is contrasted with the impossibility of reaching absolute self-knowledge.

The mingling of brightness and darkness, superiority and inferiority, clarity and obscurity, equally marks the life of Svevo’s protagonist. Just as Gabriel’s dead mother still plays an important part in her son’s life, *Una vita* opens with Alfonso’s letter to his mother. We learn that Alfonso is reluctant to stay in the city: he asks his mother if it would be better for him to return to his village. Gabriel’s mother wanted to preserve the dignity of family life; Alfonso’s mother perhaps wants to build it up. As Alfonso never manages to find his place in the new surroundings, his mother’s wish for him to succeed in the new reality of the city only reinforces his feelings of inferiority.

We learn from the very beginning that the Maller bank, as one of the settings for Alfonso’s city life, is a place of estrangement for him. Disorganized and thus not

“against the intensity of passion and the inevitability of death” that “his own oversensitive reactions […] shrink to their proper perspective.” (Kelly, p. 274.).
well adapted to the surroundings of order and business, Alfonso is set in contrast with the other employees. Sanneo obeys Maller’s orders and supervises others, while Miceni is disobedient. Yet, despite their differences, they both belong to the world of pragmatic reality. Alfonso, on the other hand, never does. He tries to escape the threatening reality of the bank, which provokes a dark vision of the world, by creating his own, individual world. In order to retain a sense of significance and clarity of vision, which have been shaken by the alienating surroundings of the bank, he places himself at the centre of his own dreams: “Centro dei suoi sogni era lui stesso, padrone di sé, ricco, felice. Aveva delle ambizioni di cui consapevole a pieno non era che quando sognava.”21 Like Gabriel Conroy, who whenever disturbed by the external world re-asserts his strength by perceiving himself as different and superior to others, Alfonso Nitti builds a cosmos dominated by his imagined superiority.

Indeed, as he feels growingly insecure and disturbed, he abandons himself to long walks. If Gabriel imagines his solitary walks in the Dublin snow, Alfonso is trying to find “la cura di aria aperta”22 – the reinforcement of the open air. In walking through the city, his thoughts melt into another dream:23 “Avrebbe lui fondato la moderna filosofia italiana con la traduzione di un buon lavoro tedesco e nello stesso tempo con un suo lavoro originale.”24 The frustration provoked by his growing inefficiency is replaced by a stronger illusion of spiritual superiority – it now presupposes the dream of success. This brings him a clarity of vision. Like Gabriel, who at the end of the story perceives himself as an artist capable of finding symbols

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21 Svevo, p. 92. (“The centre of these dreams was himself, all self-mastery, wealth and happiness. Only when daydreaming was he aware of the extent of his ambitions.” From Italo Svevo, A Life, transl. from the Italian by Archibald Colquhoun (London: Secker and Warburg, 1980), p. 14).
22 Svevo, p. 110.
23 In stressing that Alfonso is an extremely weak character, critics underline his inclination to abandon himself to dreams.
24 Svevo, p. 149. (“He would lay the foundations of modern Italian philosophy by translating a good German work and at the same time writing an original work of his own.” From Svevo, A Life, p. 78).
and signs in the ordinary world of everyday banality, Alfonso imagines himself as a philosopher and a translator. His sense of superiority brings a distinct vision that he will one day become famous: “Voleva lavorare e il successo sarebbe venuto da sé.”

Not only is Alfonso’s job frustrating; he equally oscillates between superiority and inferiority, brightness and obscurity during his visits to the Maller house. The house with its elegant saloons represents upper class society; Alfonso feels insignificant, obscure to himself in his attitudes and deeds once again. He will try to overcome this sensation by becoming closer to Annetta. Although at the beginning he is not attracted to her -- he despises “quelle che’egli riteneva fossero le loro abitudini sessuali”, and believes “di non poter somigliare loro e si sentiva ed era allora molto differente” -- his feelings develop; his initial indifference will be transformed into attraction.

However, Alfonso is not confident in his own feelings. This provokes a lack of perspective and obscurity of knowledge. Like Joyce’s protagonist who in comparing himself to Michael Furey questions his own feelings, Alfonso questions his love towards Annetta: “Quello doveva essere l’amore, il desiderio di una persona e di nessun’altra.” In comparing himself to Michael Furey in his final epiphany, Gabriel realizes that he has never experienced a feeling similar to Michael Furey’s for Gretta. Yet, he “knew that such a feeling must be love.” The English modal used together with the verb ‘to know’ suggests that absolute self-knowledge is impossible. What it is that Gabriel has ‘discerned’, remains unclear. Alfonso uses the modal doveva to denote his love for Annetta. The Italian modal used in imperfetto, implies a greater

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25 Svevo, p. 112; The emphasis is mine. (“He wanted to work, to work well, and success would come by itself.” From Svevo, A Life, p. 78).
26 Svevo, p. 133. (“…and he despised what he considered to be their sexual habits. […] He could never be like them, he thought, and felt and actually was very different.” From Svevo, A Life, p. 61).
27 Svevo p. 171. The emphasis is mine. (“”For this must be love, this desire for one person and for no one else.” From Svevo, A Life, p. 102).
28 Joyce, p. 176. The emphasis is mine.
degree of uncertainty and relativity than the English one. Indeed, in trying to define his feelings towards Annetta, Alfonso will always remain insecure and obscure in his attitudes.

As Annetta chooses to write a novel with him, he has a chance to reach through the book that he is supposed to create not only his own balance, but also a clear and distinct picture of his world. In Joyce’s story, the important element through which Gabriel manages to achieve the comforting sense of stability and desired integrity is his speech. It is after the speech that he transforms Gretta into a symbol, which gives birth to his desire for her and makes him certain that she feels the same. On the other hand, Alfonso is not capable of asserting his wishes through writing; he has to clarify his attitudes in a different manner. Macario, his rival in Annetta’s literary circle, will play the essential role here. During one of his conversations with Alfonso, he reflects on women: “Con le donne bisogna saper agire. […] baciare una mano, un volto […]. Aveva sognato […] di aver agito con Annetta.” As if encouraged by these words, Alfonso initiates his relationship with Maller’s daughter. Almost imitating his rival, he manages, at least for a moment, to define his vague feelings towards her. Indeed, in gaining Annetta’s love, Alfonso is overwhelmed with the feeling of superiority. The lineaments of his world seem to be undisturbed and clearly drawn: “Ma Annetta era sua! Non era questo già molto […] che avrebbe dovuto sentirsi l’uomo più felice sulla terra?” Yet, the question mark and the past conditional of avrebbe dovuto reflect doubt rather than absolute conviction.

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29 Imperfetto, together with the conditional modes, often suggests doubt.
30 Svevo, p. 195. This is Svevo’s emphasis. (“With women one must act. A kiss for example, a kiss on a hand, a face […]. He imagined taking Macario’s advice seriously and acting with Annetta.” From Svevo, A Life, p. 129).
31 Being rivals, Macario and Alfonso overlap in their wishes. This is why Alfonso whom Annetta initially chooses as a writer of her novel, can find support in Macario.
32 Svevo, p. 248. (“But Annetta was his! Was not that a great deal, so much that he should feel the happiest man on earth?” From Svevo, A Life, p. 184).
Indeed, Alfonso’s fragile sense of achievement, which he will never stop questioning, will be strongly denied once again as he decides to leave the city and to return home for a while. As his mother dies, the sense of failure becomes strong. He walks through the village covered with snow:

La neve ghiacciata scricchiava sotto ai loro piedi. [...] Nel villaggio erano stati fatti dei tentativi meschini di spazzare via la neve e poche macchie più oscurè della terra denudata interrompevano finalmente la terribile uniformità bianca.  

As in the case of Joyce’s protagonist, *la terribile uniformità bianca* suggests both the terrifying stillness of death and the utmost clarity of insight. Yet, while Joyce’s snow is falling through the universe, Svevo’s has fallen thickly to cover the small village. Indeed, in the final description of the snow Joyce repeats the word *falling* several times, as opposed to the verb *lay* which is used only once: “It *lay* thickly [the snow] drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones...” This suggests that death, darkness and obscurity are more destructive in *Una vita*. Indeed, as Alfonso comes back to the city, he notices that the weather has changed: “Mentre fuori fioccava la neve bianca e allegra, dal mare soffiava lo scirocco [...]. Alfonso ebbe il triste sentimento che quel tempo non avesse più a cessare.” People around him have also changed. He is not treated well in the office. Annetta refuses to meet him. Trieste becomes a cold Mediterranean city purified by the freezing wind. Feeling helpless and defeated, Alfonso clearly sees that he can find his way out only through suicide.

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33 Svevo, p. 301. (“The ice-covered snow crackled beneath their feet [...]. In the village petty attempts had been made to sweep away the snow, and the terrible white uniformity was at last broken by some darker patches of bare earth.” From Svevo, *A Life*, p. 240).

34 Joyce, p. 176. The emphasis is mine.

35 Svevo, p. 312. (“Out in the country gay white snow flakes had swirled but here a sirocco was blowing from the sea [...] Alfonso had a sad feeling that this weather would never change.” From Svevo, *A Life*, p. 252).
Gaining awareness of his life, Gabriel falls asleep. The thoughts of the snow falling through the universe suggest a clear vision: the sharpness of his epiphanic insight is opposed to the darkness of its meaning. Yet, even Gabriel’s negative self-knowledge can be read as flawed. Perhaps he dramatises his own lack of feeling just as excessively and falsely as he previously dramatised the certainty of his love towards Gretta. What he has ‘discerned’ remains unclear. If Joyce suggests that at the personal level absolute self-knowledge is impossible and, at the universal level, it is insignificant, the brightness of the snow is blinding. Clarity can never be absolute; vision can easily be blurred.

In the city, purified by the cold wind, Alfonso gains a definite picture of his world: it appears irrevocably pointless. His sense of failure is stronger than Gabriel’s. As he commits suicide, his clarity of vision is contrasted with the absolute obscurity and pessimism of his deed.

In the case of both writers, brightness does not exist without darkness.