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“The Lass of Aughrim” – Love, Tragedy, and the Power of the Past

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“The Lass of Aughrim” – Love, Tragedy, and the Power of the Past

The traditional Irish ballad “The Lass of Aughrim” appears in James Joyce’s short story “The Dead” and provides both significance to the unfolding of the story itself, as well as insight into the frailty of human relationships and the human condition. The song, while appearing only briefly in the story, is the point at which the story drastically shifts. “The Lass of Aughrim” is central to the development of Gretta Conroy as a character, to an understanding of the complexity of Gabriel and Gretta’s marriage, and to the tension present in the “The Dead” which allows the story to communicate powerful and relatable truth.

In the lyrics to “The Lass of Aughrim,” the perspective of the song shifts back and forth between two former lovers singing to each other, lamenting the failings of their relationship. The lyrics describe, “A peasant girl seduced by a lord; when she brings her baby to the castle door, the lord’s mother imitates his voice and sends her away” (Puchner 199). The peasant woman sings of how she and her baby were shut out of the castle in the rain. She sings, “My babe lies cold within my arms / For none will let me in” (McKeown). Because of the woman’s perceived rejection by her lover and unstable social status, the woman finds herself desperate. In an act of suicide, “both mother and child are drowned at sea, and the repentant lord curses his mother” (Puchner 199). “The Lass of Aughrim” tells the story of the imperfections and fragility of human love which lead to heartbreak and to untimely death.

In “The Dead,” “The Lass of Aughrim” serves as an interpretive lens for addressing the weighty subject of a tragic death motivated by love, especially when such love has been hidden within the memory for years. During the holiday party that takes place in “The Dead,” Gabriel observes his wife Gretta, with “grace and mystery in her attitude” listening to “The Lass of Aughrim” being sung in a distant room (Joyce 199). Though hearing the song causes the normally sociable Gretta to retreat into herself, it is not until the end of the story, when Gabriel hopes that he and Gretta can be intimate, that she bursts into tears and reveals that the ballad holds a great deal of importance to her. Michael Furey, a young man with a beautiful voice that Gretta was formerly in love with, used to sing the song. ““He was very delicate,”” she says (Joyce 204). Gretta reveals to her husband that Michael was very sick and yet snuck out in the rain to see her; she tells Gabriel, ““I think he died for me”” (Joyce 205). Gabriel, shocked and pained by the sudden revelation that he is not his wife’s first love, withdraws from her. Gretta has hidden the pain of her past from her husband, and, to an extent, even from herself. It took her hearing “The Lass of Aughrim” to be reminded of the pain that she had repressed. Though Gretta clearly loves Gabriel and calls him “a very generous person,” she knows that he has never sacrificially given of himself in the way that Michael did for her (Joyce 203). Ironically, “The Lass of Aughrim,” a song depicting a misinterpretation between lovers as leading to their tragic separation, serves to reveal the lack of true intimacy and genuine love binding the Conroys, bringing about an emotional distance between them.

Musically, “The Lass of Aughrim” reflects the haunting nature of lost love that its lyrics depict. In recording my rendition of this Irish ballad, I decided to keep the song at a slow tempo and to use only viola and piano instrumentally. Additionally, I performed the piece at a relatively low dynamic; I tried to match the timbre and tone of my voice with the elegiac mood and heavy

subject matter that both “The Lass of Aughrim” and “The Dead” depict. Such musical choices allowed the somber nature of this piece to be adequately reflected, thus giving each of the words that I sang more weight. The overall mood of “The Lass of Aughrim,” created by the music itself, is melancholy and evocative, thus pointing back to the song’s lamenting lyrics. In the song, the woman remembers the “first token” that her lover gave her as well as a specific night that they had spent together in the past. In her recollections, though, the lover looks back in bitterness and regret, singing, “When we were together / Which I’m sorry now to tell” (The Lass of Aughrim). I performed this song in a reflective manner, attempting to make my voice sound contemplative, downcast, and even a bit numb. Working with this piece allowed me to contemplate my own understanding of the frailty and shortcomings of human love. Music is indeed an incredible means of stirring deep emotions in the hearts of its hearers in order to express powerful truth.

The lovers in “The Lass of Aughrim” offer an insight into the fragility of human love and its potentially disastrous consequences. Gretta, too, had experienced such tragedy firsthand, but the real heartbreak that she currently faces is her damaged intimacy with her husband. The past, especially when seen in terms of love and love lost, can have haunting effects on the present if not properly addressed, communicated, and grieved over. As stated by Joyce, the dead have a “wayward and flickering existence” that never truly fades (207).

Works Cited

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