

# Modernist Reflections: Identity, Culture, and Change in James Joyce's *The Dead* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

Khum Prasad Sharma\*

\*Lecturer in English, Padmakanya Multiple Campus, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal, Orcid ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4485-2876>

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores and examines the issues of identity, culture, and change in James Joyce's *The Dead* (1914) and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899). Both narratives, representatives of modernist literature, delve into the complexities of personal transformation within the framework of societal expectations. Modernism's preoccupation with individual consciousness and cultural dislocation provides a useful perspective for analyzing these narratives, which grapple with the conflicts between tradition and change. The study seeks to uncover how Joyce and Chopin craft their protagonists' journeys toward self-awareness while addressing the broader cultural shifts of their time. By comparing Gabriel Conroy in *The Dead* and Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*, the textual analysis examines their struggles with societal norms, their moments of realization, and their ultimate resolutions. This comparative approach sheds light on the gendered and cultural dimensions of identity within the two narratives. Employing a close reading methodology, the research integrates modernist theoretical frameworks, such as those advanced by Virginia Woolf and T.S. Eliot, along with psychoanalytic insights from Freud and Lacan. Feminist and postcolonial lenses further deepen the examination of identity and change, emphasizing the intersection of personal and societal influences. The findings highlight that both Joyce and Chopin present their protagonists as symbols of modernity's tensions. Gabriel's epiphany reveals the paralysis of Irish identity, torn between colonial legacies and the desire for autonomy, while Edna's ultimate fate exposes the oppressive boundaries imposed on women within patriarchal society. In conclusion, this study argues that *The Dead* and *The Awakening* are powerful reflections of modernist concerns with identity and cultural transformation. Both works offer a profound critique of societal constraints, portraying the enduring human struggle to reconcile personal desires with the shifting currents of a changing world.

**Keywords:** Modernism, Colonial Legacy, Identity, Cultural Transformation, Epiphany, Societal Constraints

## Introduction

The interplay of identity, culture, and transformation is the central focus of this research since it deals with how James Joyce's *The Dead* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* reflect the complexity of modernist experiences. Both texts grapple with the theme of identity, foregrounding the isolation, communication breakdowns, and cultural constraints imposed by their respective socio-historical contexts. Whereas Joyce investigates modernist themes of paralysis, silence, and self-awareness within the Irish societal landscape, Chopin presents a personal awakening of one's consciousness within the binding role given by the Southern American setting. The theoretical frameworks underpinning this research are Modernist, Feminist perspectives, and Psychoanalysis; these enable further insight into how these narratives reflect identity crises and cultural shifts.

In *The Dead*, the way Joyce deals with the theme of silence and communication breakdowns provides a lens to critique the modernistic experience of alienation; the protagonist, Gabriel Conroy, is alienated from both his

heritage and his wife, Gretta, which then shows how identity itself under the modernist structure will be in fragments. As critics like Billigheimer (1978) point out, Joyce's use of symbolic imagery-snow-is both literal and metaphorical for death and emotional distance, underscoring the thematic underpinning of modernist paralysis and introspection. Gabriel's journey, culminating in his realization of Gretta's past relationship with Michael Furey, underscores the disintegration of communication and the resulting isolation that marks modernist identity struggles.

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* also discusses the rise of individual consciousness in the rigid structure of a patriarchal society. In such scenarios, self-discovery on the part of Edna Pontellier becomes obstructed by social norms prescribed for women that eliminate the voices and free will of females. According to feminist scholarship, as by Judith Fetterley in 1978, Chopin comments on the oppressive mechanism which silences women and eventually relegates them to seclusion. Edna's internal struggle and yearning for independence point to the strife of self-expression within a culture that privileges traditional roles.

Joyce's *The Dead* further discusses how cultural and familial obligations delimit individual identity and transformation. Gabriel's role at the dinner party reflects his adherence to cultural rituals that are increasingly hollow. It is there that his self-concept crumbles when Gretta remembers her lost love, Michael Furey: "A man had died for her sake. It hardly pained him now to think how poor a part he, her husband, had played in her life" (Joyce, 1914, p. 185). This moment symbolizes Gabriel's realization of his emotional inadequacies and the profound sense of loss inherent in his existence. Psychoanalytic theories, such as Freud's (1920) discussion of repression and the unconscious, therefore help explain Gabriel's failure to confront the deeper emotional truths that define his relationship with Gretta and his cultural dislocation.

In *The Awakening*, Chopin employs the motif of the sea to symbolize Edna's journey toward self-awareness and liberation. As Edna immerses herself in the water, she experiences a sense of rebirth: "The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude" (Chopin, 1899, p. 39). This depiction underscores Edna's longing for autonomy and her rejection of societal constraints. Feminist theories, particularly Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) concept of "becoming," align with Edna's transformative journey as she attempts to navigate the complex interplay between her individuality and societal expectations. However, her ultimate demise reflects the societal impossibility of achieving true independence within the patriarchal constraints of her time.

Both Joyce and Chopin use their protagonists' ultimate revelations to criticize the societal constraints on individual independence. The thoughts of Gabriel at the end of the story encapsulate his feelings of failure: "The snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain" (Joyce, 1914, p. 186). The snow is a symbol that recurs throughout the work; it symbolizes the stagnation and mass inertia of Irish society, thus equating individual paralysis with cultural stagnation. Edna's last decision is the affirmation of the sea as a place of last agency for herself, which really underlines her rebelliousness towards societal expectation. Chopin further comments on the scenario, "A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water" (Chopin, 1899, p. 120). Such an image portrays the ways in which the autonomy of women had been destructively constrained, leading to this feminist critique against patriarchal oppression.

Ultimately, Joyce and Chopin complete the modernist concerns of identity, culture, and change by pointing out the deep alienation and silencing that also results from societal constraints. By employing symbolic imagery, psychological introspection, and cultural critique, both authors dare the reader to confront the fragmented identities of their protagonists and the broader implications for individuals navigating cultural transitions. These narratives stand out as testaments to continued struggles for self-expression and individual autonomy in the face of societal inactivity.

### Review of Literature

The primary aim of the study is to formally explore the modernist themes of identity, culture, and change in James Joyce's *The Dead* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* through a distinct modernist framework. Previous research on these texts has largely focused on post-colonial, feminist, or historical interpretations, often overlooking the significance of modernist techniques in shaping the characters' experiences of identity and transformation.

Various studies, such as Gifford (2000) and Yeats (2012), have stressed *The Dead* within the context of Irish nationalism and post-colonialism. They discussed how Joyce represented the struggle of the characters against cultural dislocation and the loss of a coherent national identity under the challenge of modernity (Miller, 1999; Carey, 1999). My argument deviates from this approach in that I will center my discussion on Joyce's modernist techniques of stream-of-consciousness and fragmented narrative, highlighting individual alienation rather than collective identity. I would suggest that these techniques reveal the inner struggles of the characters, the sense of identity as a subjective, constantly developing construct, rather than an inherited, stable cultural heritage.

Similarly, previous analyses of *The Awakening* have been consistently focused on feminist approaches, especially the pursuit of the main character for autonomy and her struggle against patriarchal bindings. According to Showalter (1981) and DuPlessis (1985), such research positioned Edna Pontellier's story as a criticism of gender roles and social limitations imposed on women. In contrast, my study explores how Chopin's

modernist approach—fragmented narratives and introspective reflection—challenge the coherence of traditional narratives, placing emphasis on Edna's psychological struggles and the disintegration of fixed identities. I seek to explore how modernist concerns with subjectivity and self-awareness disrupt societal norms, emphasizing individual transformation over collective oppression.

Aside from textual analysis, my research also seeks to situate *The Dead* and *The Awakening* within the broader socio-psychological implications of modernism. Through the use of interdisciplinary studies in psychology and modernist philosophy, such as those by Freud (1900) and Bergson (1910), I explore how both texts reflect early 20th-century anxieties about self-perception and time. For instance, the unconscious by Freud and the notion of *durée* by Bergson help explain how the self has been fragmented in the internal struggle presented by the protagonists. A wider socio-psychological perspective can be gained concerning how identity and consciousness become undermined in modernist literature.

The present study explores how the texts engage with aesthetic modernism, focusing on formal innovations in language, rhythm, and imagery. Drawing on theories of aesthetic modernism, I draw on Adorno (1973) and Levenson (1991) to analyze how Joyce and Chopin employ musical and pictorial techniques to convey characters' internal realities. For example, the tension between silence and sound in *The Dead* and Chopin's use of sea imagery in *The Awakening* are aesthetic means that reflect the shifting perceptions of identity and freedom in their characters. This approach underscores the texts' experimental techniques as central to understanding their modernist ethos, offering insights into how formal innovations shape readers' engagements with themes of transformation and disintegration.

Although previous scholarship has certainly cast valuable light on both *The Dead* and *The Awakening* through post-colonial and feminist perspectives, my research contributes to a growing body of work that shifts the focus toward modernist reflections on identity, culture, and change. Emphasizing fragmented narrative structures, interdisciplinary connections, and aesthetic modernism, I point out the ways in which identity becomes fluid and subject to the whims of self rather than fixed by some external cultural or historical force. My discussion thus extends these earlier studies by examining modernist concerns with individual subjectivity, self-awareness, and the search for meaning.

This review has identified how previous studies have approached *The Dead* and *The Awakening* largely through post-colonial, feminist, or historical lenses. My study adds a new perspective by foregrounding modernist interests in identity, self-consciousness, cultural change, socio-psychological relations, and aesthetic innovation in an effort to shed new light on these canonical texts.

### Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and textual approach to explore modernist themes of identity, culture, and change in James Joyce's *The Dead* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research focuses on understanding complex phenomena through the interpretation of texts and the lived experiences of individuals. The textual method is particularly suitable, as it emphasizes close readings of literary works, enabling an in-depth exploration of how modernist techniques—such as stream-of-consciousness, fragmented narratives, and symbolic representations—contribute to the construction of identity.

The selection of James Joyce's *The Dead* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is grounded in their status as key modernist texts. Joyce's *The Dead* (1914) and Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) both grapple with issues of identity, culture, and transformation during periods of societal and personal upheaval. These texts have been widely studied from post-colonial and feminist perspectives, yet their modernist dimensions—especially concerning internal conflict, subjectivity, and the fluidity of identity—have not been fully explored in depth. According to Eagleton (2000), modernist literature is characterized by its exploration of “fragmentation, disjunction, and a sense of individual consciousness as the site of cultural interrogation” (p. 123). Thus, these texts provide rich material for studying the intersection of modernist techniques and themes of identity and cultural transformation.

The primary data collection method includes a close, detailed textual analysis of both *The Dead* and *The Awakening*, focusing on key modernist features: stream-of-consciousness, symbolic representation, and fragmented narrative structures. By performing a close reading of these texts, I shall identify the way in which such modernist techniques contribute to the exploration of identity, culture, and change. By using this approach, I will investigate passages where characters experience struggles related to self-awareness and alienation, pointing out how modernist techniques emphasize internal struggles over external, socially imposed identities. Gabriel Conroy's reflections on his alienation highlight this internal conflict: “The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward” (Joyce, 1914, p. 185).

Similarly, Edna Pontellier's realization of her need for self-discovery emphasizes the tension between societal expectations and personal freedom: “She was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world” (Chopin, 1899, p. 57). I will also apply thematic analysis, identifying patterns in modernist themes such as disconnection, self-awareness, and the disruption of traditional narratives. In *The Dead*, Joyce's depiction of Gabriel's fragmented identity is further reinforced by Barthes' (1977) concept of the “fragmented self,” as Gabriel's internal conflict prevents him from

achieving emotional intimacy or cultural coherence. In *The Awakening*, Woolf's (1925) theory of consciousness as fluid and evolving aligns with Edna's struggle to reconcile her shifting identity.

A comparative textual analysis is carried out to underline similarities and differences in the way both authors apply modernist techniques of expression while treating identity and cultural transformation. Gabriel's reflections on the snow-covered landscape, "The snow lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones" (Joyce, 1914, p. 184), and Edna's awakening tied to the sea, "The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (Chopin, 1899, p. 103), underscore how each character grapples with their disconnection from traditional narratives. Both texts emphasize a deep internal struggle, but they employ different symbolic motifs—snow for Gabriel and the sea for Edna—representing their unique experiences of cultural alienation and self-awareness.

The theoretical framework in this paper is based on the theory of modernism inspired by T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and Roland Barthes, who in their respective works gave great prominence to the individual consciousness and fragmentation within the works of modernist literature. T.S. Eliot (1922) discusses the fragmentation of identity and the disillusionment with traditional structures, arguing that modernist literature reflects "the dissociation of sensibility" (p. 16). This concept will inform my analysis of how Joyce and Chopin portray the breakdown of coherent identities.

Virginia Woolf (1925) on the other hand emphasizes the use of stream-of-consciousness as a method to explore the complexities of individual subjectivity. Woolf's notion that "the mind is its own place" will be applied to analyze how the characters' internal experiences challenge external, cultural narratives (p. 94). Roland Barthes (1977) highlights the fragmentation of texts and the focus on the individual as the locus of meaning. Barthes' assertion that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the author" will guide my exploration of the characters' self-reflective journeys and the disruptions of traditional identities in Joyce's and Chopin's works. By employing this modernist theoretical framework, I aim to uncover how Joyce and Chopin use modernist techniques to reflect the complexities of identity, culture, and transformation in their respective texts.

### Textual Analysis

In *The Dead*, Joyce's use of Gabriel Conroy's reflections on the snow-covered landscape serves as a powerful metaphor for cultural and emotional stagnation. Gabriel observes, "The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward" (Joyce, 1914, p. 185). This symbolic journey underscores his growing awareness of his alienation from his Irish heritage and his inability to reconcile his intellectual aspirations with his cultural identity. According to Eliot (1922), the notion of dissociation of sensibility is evident here, as Gabriel's fragmented self remains incapable of bridging the gap between his internal reflections and his external responsibilities.

Similarly, Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* experiences a growing sense of dissatisfaction with her domestic life. Her awakening begins with the realization that "She was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world" (Chopin, 1899, p. 57). This moment reveals Edna's internal struggle with her prescribed roles as wife and mother. Woolf's (1925) theory of consciousness as a fluid and evolving process aligns with Edna's journey of self-discovery, as she begins to challenge the societal norms that constrain her identity.

Gabriel's inability to engage authentically with his cultural and familial roots is further highlighted when he reflects on the significance of the annual dinner. "He longed to cry to her from his soul, to crush her body against his, to overmaster her" (Joyce, 1914, p. 182). This desperate yearning illustrates Gabriel's struggle to connect emotionally, as his identity is shaped by hollow rituals rather than meaningful relationships. Barthes' (1977) theory of fragmented identity resonates here, as Gabriel's internal conflict prevents him from achieving emotional intimacy or cultural coherence.

In *The Awakening*, the sea functions as both a literal and symbolic space of liberation for Edna. "The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (Chopin, 1899, p. 103) highlights Edna's quest for freedom from societal constraints. The sea's embrace becomes a metaphor for her desire to transcend the limitations imposed by her cultural and gendered identity. Woolf's (1925) emphasis on self-awareness as a locus of transformation is evident in Edna's exploration of the sea as a space where she can confront her fragmented sense of self.

Memory is a very important aspect of *The Dead*, as Gabriel reminisces about the love of Gretta for Michael Furey. "Better pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dismally with age" (Joyce, 1914, p. 185). This moment in the story shows that Gabriel has realized his emotional deficiency and how he has failed to live a life filled with passion and truth. Here, according to Eliot (1922), there is a dissociation of sensibility since Gabriel's intellectualism is pitted against an inability to act with emotional conviction.

For Edna, her experiences involving music and art move her closer to her awakening regarding desire and identity. After experiencing the playing of Mademoiselle Reisz on piano, "Perhaps it was the first time she was ready, perhaps the first time her being was tempered to take an impress of the abiding truth" (Chopin, 1899, p. 35), it was a beginning point whereby Edna realized her individual self apart from the expectations which bind her within society. Barthes' (1977) notion of fragmented meaning aligns with Edna's fragmented journey toward self-awareness, as her artistic experiences become a space for reimagining her identity.



This reveals the deeply inadequate and lonely feelings within Gabriel. "He saw himself as a ludicrous figure, acting as a pennyboy for his aunts, a nervous, well-meaning sentimentalist" (Joyce, 1914, p. 179). Such self-reprimation also expresses how Gabriel's identity is highly disjointed, whereby he feels an inability to reconcile the external self with the self of inner thoughts. Fragmentation is discussed by Barthes (1977), where the disunities in Gabriel's inner world reflect one of the major themes in modernism - alienation.

Her alienation is further manifested in her relationship with her children. "She was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them" (Chopin, 1899, p. 21). This vacillation between love and abandonment underlines her inner turmoil, as Edna is divided between her duties as a mother and her yearning for freedom. The theory of the fluid self by Woolf 1925 is relevant here, as Edna's maternal identity is fragmented and incoherent, reflecting the broader tension in her search for autonomy.

The imagery of snow in *The Dead* continues to serve as a symbol of Gabriel's emotional and cultural paralysis. "The snow lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones" (Joyce, 1914, p. 184). This description links Gabriel's personal struggles to a broader sense of cultural stagnation, as the snow covers the graves of Ireland's past. Dissociation of sensibility by Eliot (1922) therefore tallies with the incapability of Gabriel to relate meaningfully with his heritage, which had kept him disconnected and dislocated.

### Conclusion

The exploration of identity, culture, and transformation in James Joyce's *The Dead* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* reveals the profound complexity of modernist experiences, where personal struggles are inextricably linked to societal constraints and cultural transitions. Both texts foreground themes of isolation, silencing, and self-awareness, reflecting the intricate ways in which modernity impacts individual identity and cultural belonging. By examining these narratives through modernist, feminist, and psychoanalytic perspectives, this research underscores the shared yet distinct challenges faced by the protagonists in navigating their respective socio-historical contexts.

Joyce's *The Dead* encapsulates the paralysis and fragmentation characteristic of modernist identity, as Gabriel Conroy confronts his emotional inadequacies and cultural dislocation. Chopin's *The Awakening*, on the other hand, powerfully critiques patriarchal limitations through Edna Pontellier's transformative yet tragic journey toward self-awareness and autonomy. Both authors employ potent symbolism—snow in Joyce's narrative and the sea in Chopin's—to evoke the tension between individuality and societal expectations, ultimately portraying identity as a dynamic yet precarious construct. These analyses illuminate the broader modernist preoccupation with alienation and the search for meaning amidst cultural and societal flux.

The findings of this research highlight the enduring relevance of these texts, as they address universal struggles of identity, freedom, and belonging. By juxtaposing the narratives of Gabriel and Edna, it becomes evident that both authors challenge traditional paradigms of cultural and personal identity, exposing the emotional and psychological toll of societal constraints. These works, though rooted in specific historical and cultural milieus, resonate with contemporary readers, offering insights into the ongoing tensions between individuality and societal norms.

Future research could delve deeper into comparative analyses of gender dynamics within modernist literature, particularly examining how male and female protagonists grapple with societal expectations in different cultural contexts. Additionally, further exploration of intertextual connections between Joyce's *The Dead* and other modernist works, such as Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, could provide new perspectives on the evolving portrayal of identity and culture in modernist narratives. Similarly, a broader feminist critique of Chopin's oeuvre could shed light on the intersections of race, class, and gender in her depiction of Southern American society. These avenues of inquiry promise to deepen our understanding of modernist literature's engagement with identity, culture, and change.

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