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From Hybridity to Transcendence: The Reconstruction of Vernacular Cosmopolitan Identity in Joyce's *The Dead* from a Postcolonial Perspective

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Abstract: James Joyce's *The Dead*, a classic modernist Irish text deeply embedded with profound national metaphors, is set against the turbulent backdrop of Ireland's colonial society prior to its formal independence. Taking the protagonist Gabriel's complex identity transformation—from his initial positioning as a compliant "West Briton" to his ultimate, profound resolution of "setting out on journey westward"—as the primary narrative thread, the story profoundly exposes the severe predicaments of native identity fragmentation. Furthermore, it highlights the deep spiritual confusion directly caused by the inherent exclusiveness and ideological narrowness of Irish cultural nationalism operating under prolonged colonial oppression. Utilizing Homi Bhabha's influential postcolonial theory as the core analytical framework, this comprehensive paper systematically explores the multifaceted evolution of Gabriel's identity from three distinct but interconnected aspects. First, it examines the psychological oppression of the Other under the strict discipline of dominant colonial discourse. Second, it analyzes the complex representation of cultural hybridity, which is intricately interwoven by both colonial influences and native traditions. Third, it investigates the gradual emergence of vernacular cosmopolitanism during the critical process of the protagonist's identity awakening. Ultimately, this study further probes into the essential mechanisms of national cultural self-rescue. It aims to clearly illustrate the internal, transformative path whereby marginalized nations situated in restrictive colonial contexts can successfully achieve meaningful cultural reconstruction and genuine identity transcendence through the strategic embrace of hybridity, viewed specifically from the progressive perspective of vernacular cosmopolitanism.

Keywords: james joyce; postcolonialism; vernacular cosmopolitanism; hybridity; cultural identity; modernism

Received: 17 March 2026

Revised: 24 April 2026

Accepted: 06 May 2026

Published: 12 May 2026



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1. Introduction

James Joyce (1882–1941) is a distinguished Irish writer and a key figure of Western modernist literature. His works consistently center on identity construction, national trauma, and cultural resistance in Ireland under colonial rule. His representative work *Dubliners* was published in 1914 amid the surge of the nationalist movement, laying bare the identity confusion of the Irish people engendered by British colonial domination. As the concluding piece of the short story collection, *The Dead* has long been regarded as a postcolonial classic imbued with national metaphors. The story is set against the backdrop of a colonial society. Through the spiritual predicament of the protagonist Gabriel, the work reflects the division and perplexity in the construction of Irish subjective identity amid the interplay of colonial and native cultures. In this sense, *The Dead* not only encapsulates the thematic concerns of *Dubliners* but also anticipates the more radical narrative experiments of Joyce's later works, making it a significant text for understanding the trajectory of Irish literary modernism.

At present, scholars have explored this text from diverse postcolonial perspectives: some have examined the link between Gabriel's identity transformation and national identity, while others have analyzed the internal contradictions inherent in his hybridity. At the level of theoretical practice, Homi Bhabha's theoretical framework has become an important approach to exploring Ireland's spiritual liberation. Nevertheless, the academic community has not yet fully established a systematic connection between the evolution of hybridity and the development of vernacular cosmopolitanism, thus overlooking how national subjects achieve identity awakening through vernacular globalization and global vernacularization. Moreover, existing studies tend to treat hybridity as a static condition rather than a dynamic process that can lead to a proactive, ethically engaged form of cosmopolitanism rooted in the local [1]. Therefore, based on Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theory, this paper investigates the path of national cultural self-rescue in the colonial context from three dimensions: the oppression of the Other, the representation of hybridity, and the emergence of vernacular cosmopolitanism. It aims to explain the internal path through which colonized nations realize cultural reconstruction and identity transcendence by relying on hybridity.

2. The Rootless Identity of the "West Briton"

Within Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theory, colonial mimicry stems from the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other [1, 2]. It refers to a subject who is expected to approximate the colonizer yet can never fully complete the transformation. This identity is not merely a matter of political allegiance but manifests itself in everyday practices, linguistic choices, and embodied performances that betray the subject's anxious oscillation between two cultural worlds [3]. Gabriel's pro-British, self-Europeanized, and locally alienated "West Briton" identity lays the groundwork for the subsequent complexity of his hybridity and the emergence of vernacular cosmopolitanism.

This mimetic identity first manifests itself in his daily bodily practices. After embarrassing himself with an inappropriate remark to Lily, Gabriel "*tried to dispel it by arranging his cuffs and the bows of his tie.*" When his wife mentions his code of conduct, he "*laughed nervously and patted his tie reassuringly.*" Within the colonial cultural order, British dress and gentlemanly demeanor are not private habits, but visible symbols of British middle-class authority and colonial class hierarchy. Gabriel's repeated adjustment of his bodily gestures constitutes a typical act of colonial mimicry. Mimicry is a form of control imposed by the colonizer. The colonized actively adopt the external forms of the colonizer and internalize their values to cast off the indigenous "Other" identity and move closer to the center of power. Such deliberate maintenance precisely exposes the unnaturalness of this identity: a genuine British gentleman has no need to confirm his identity through constant adjustment of his attire, and only the imitator caught in the space between two cultures will rely on constantly performing external symbols [4]. This excessive performance reveals the anxiety that pervades colonial mimicry, for the imitator can never fully inhabit the role he aspires to. This also leaves Gabriel in an initial, suspended, and rootless state that runs counter to Irish indigenous customs.

In fact, Gabriel not only internalizes the colonial cultural hierarchy as his personal value criterion, but also attempts to extend this standard to the micro-power field of family life. He regards goloshes as a symbol of European civilization and demands that his wife follow the lifestyle he advocates, even stating bluntly that "*everyone wears them on the Continent*" to demonstrate his identification with the culture of the metropolitan power. As a material symbol, goloshes carry the binary opposition constructed by colonial discourse that "Britain equals civilization" and "Ireland equals backwardness." Gabriel's admiration for this symbol conforms to the proposition that the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is a mixed state of attraction and repulsion. However, Aunt Julia's bewildered response "*what are goloshes*" directly punctures his cultural illusion [5, 6]. It turns out that the differential "inappropriate signifier" between British culture and Anglicized culture has placed Gabriel in an awkward predicament: the more he persists in his cultural identification with the metropolitan power and disciplines those around

him with colonial standards, the more his separation from the native is highlighted, and the more his rootless identity is further intensified. Thus, the very objects that should affirm his cosmopolitan sophistication instead become evidence of his estrangement from the lived reality of his own community.

However, colonial mimicry is destined to be a failed practice of identity. The imitator can never enter the subjective position of the colonizer and can only reside in a third space of ambiguous division between the colonial and the native, accepted by neither side. The intensification of the above mimetic acts eventually exposes Gabriel's false identity in the public sphere. At the dance, Miss Ivors publicly denounces his contribution to the pro-British newspaper *The Daily Express* and directly labels him a "West Briton." Faced with the accusation, Gabriel "coloured" and hastily conceals his embarrassment by pretending not to understand and forcing a smile. This defensive reaction completely dismantles the elite facade he has long maintained. Even though he strives to mimic the colonizer in search of superiority, he remains a marginal figure excluded from the core of power. Such double negation deprives him of all identity foundations, making him a typical hybrid subject. Therefore, Gabriel's identity as a "West Briton" is essentially a product of colonial discourse. By constructing cultural hierarchy and Eurocentric hegemony, colonial discourse makes the colonized internalize the values of the metropolitan power, thereby forming an otherized perception of the native land and self-rejection. His individual dilemma epitomizes the spiritual paralysis and identity disorientation of Irish intellectuals under colonial domination, and inevitably propels him into an unstable hybrid condition swinging between the colonial and the native.

3. The Swinging Colonial--Native Hybrid Identity

The failure of colonial mimicry does not lead Gabriel back to a pure Irish identity. Instead, it pushes him into the predicament of hybridity, which refers to the unbridgeable gap between the colonized and the culture of the metropolitan power, leaving the subject in a swinging state that can neither fully assimilate into the Western way nor completely return to the native. This duality suggests that hybridity is not a simple mixture but a site of ongoing negotiation, where neither pole can claim absolute authority over the subject's self-understanding. Although Gabriel's colonial identity appears dominant on the surface, his Irish essence has always existed. This is reflected in his conscious nostalgia in the dinner speech and his unconscious attachment to the statue of Daniel O'Connell.

At the dinner party, Gabriel praises the older generation of Irish people for "*those qualities of humanity, of hospitality, of kindly humour*" and frankly states that "*our country has no tradition which does it so much honour and which it should guard so jealously as that of its hospitality.*" Here he uses the term "*our country.*" This constitutes a subtle deviation from his identification with the culture of the metropolitan power in his daily words and deeds, meaning that he temporarily sets aside his earlier identity as a West Briton and acknowledges the Irish native community he has long alienated. However, the way this sense of belonging appears suggests its distance from tradition. Gabriel's defense of Irish tradition takes the form of a public speech, which shows that his nostalgia is not an expression of personal emotion but a rhetorical act toward the Other, aiming to construct a specific identity image. He attributes qualities such as "hospitality" to the older generation of Irish people, positions himself as part of "this new generation educated," and states directly that these virtues are lacking among the new generation. This generational division demonstrates that colonial education has created an unbridgeable gap between Gabriel and Irish tradition, so his retrieval of tradition can only be carried out in a nostalgic manner. The speech contains both an affirmation of the native and an alienation from tradition, corresponding respectively to native cultural influence and the internalization of colonial discourse [7, 8]. The two forces pull at each other, leaving his identity continuously swinging between colonial identification and native belonging without achieving stability and unity.

Different from the conscious and performative cultural nostalgia in his speech, Gabriel's interaction with the O'Connell statue reveals a deeper and unconscious form of

his native belonging. After the dinner party, he crosses O'Connell Bridge in a carriage with his wife. When he catches sight of the statue, Gabriel "*nodded familiarly to it and waved his hand,*" and said gaily: "*Good-night, Dan.*" Daniel O'Connell is a leading figure of the Irish nationalist movement in the nineteenth century, and his statue stands in the center of Dublin. Gabriel's greeting to the statue using the intimate nickname "Dan" stands in sharp contrast to the artificial performance of repeatedly adjusting his tie and cuffs at the party. The former is a natural expression of native sentiment, while the latter is a deliberate imitation of British gentlemanly demeanor. Colonial education may shape his dress and speech, but it cannot eradicate his sense of connection with Irish history. In his speech, Gabriel declares "our country" to the relatives and friends present, which is a public identity claim that requires recognition from the audience. In front of the statue, by contrast, he faces a silent past that needs no response or confirmation from anyone, thus allowing him to joke freely. Intimacy here is not a solemn quest for recognition from others, but an unthinking instinctive response. Precisely because of its casualness and playfulness, the disciplinary power of colonial identification at the conscious level fails to intervene in time, and the repressed native belonging emerges in an unguarded moment. As the setting shifts from public to private, the addressee from the audience to the statue, and the posture from proclamation to banter, Gabriel's native belonging takes on a completely different form, and his hybrid identity keeps swinging amid the shift of different situations [4, 9]. This swinging uncertainty provides precisely the possibility of transcending binary opposition. The colonized do not have to make an either-or choice between "total Westernization" and "pure nativism." Instead, they can renegotiate a new subjective position based on the reality of cultural hybridity.

4. The Journey Westward to the Identity of Vernacular Cosmopolitan

Gabriel fails to escape the pull of two cultural forces between colonial mimicry and swinging hybridity. Nevertheless, a series of subsequent shocks finally push him toward an active spiritual shift, leading him to embrace what is described as vernacular cosmopolitanism. This concept is defined as a political process emerging from the hybrid experiences of marginalized communities. It is not only deeply rooted in the soil of native culture but also oriented toward the universal boundary-transcending experience shared by all humankind. For Gabriel, vernacular cosmopolitanism means no longer regarding his own hybridity as a flaw to be overcome, but renegotiating his relationship with the native land and with the world from the hybrid position. His westward journey is precisely an embodiment of this process. Unlike elite cosmopolitanism, which often dismisses local attachments as parochial, vernacular cosmopolitanism insists that genuine openness to the universal must be grounded in a specific, lived connection to a particular place and its history.

The foreshadowing of this spiritual shift can be found even before Gabriel's speech. Looking out of the window, he sees that "*the Wellington Monument wore a gleaming cap of snow that flashed westward over the white field of Fifteen Acres.*" Wellington was born in Ireland but was accepted and ennobled by Britain, making him the ideal self that Gabriel aspires to as a "West Briton." However, the snow at this moment buries the ideal of colonial identity represented by the monument, and the light it casts westward suggests that a subconscious concern for the native land has already emerged. The western region of Connacht holds the deepest memory of Celtic tradition and serves as the native cultural heartland in contrast to the Anglicized east. Gabriel had previously refused Miss Ivors' invitation to travel to the west, but now the light shines toward the direction he has long avoided [10]. The identity boundaries sustained by colonial identification begin to loosen at this moment, and the repressed native consciousness awakens accordingly. The snow thus functions as a leveling agent, temporarily erasing the colonial hierarchies that have structured Gabriel's perception of space and belonging.

The Wellington metaphor merely suggests a subconscious loosening, while Gretta's recollection truly shakes Gabriel's cognition of colonial subjectivity. Gretta tells him that a boy named Michael Furey died for her at the age of seventeen. Before this, Gabriel had

always viewed native Ireland from a colonized urban perspective, but Gretta's past with Furey allows him to confront the impact of native culture for the first time [11]. After hearing this, "*a vague terror seized Gabriel.*" This terror points to the collapse of his cognitive framework. Furey embodied the purity of emotion in native culture with his life, whereas Gabriel can only express his identification with Irish tradition after careful deliberation. The former is a spontaneous outpouring of feeling, while the latter shows that emotion has been mediated by colonial education. This confrontation makes Gabriel fully realize that his hybridity is irreversible. He can neither become a genuine Englishman nor return to a pure Irish identity, so he has to reestablish his own identity position.

The reconstruction of such an identity gains a broader vision with the dissolution of the grey world. After listening to his wife's recollection, Gabriel sinks into deep thought. He feels that "*his own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world.*" And this grey world is exactly the "third space" where colonial culture and native culture experience hybridization, negotiation, and re-signification, and the old boundaries of identity collapse accordingly, making it possible to reexamine the self from a marginal perspective [12]. It is based on this transformation that Gabriel feels that "*the time had come for him to set out on his journey westward.*" The westward journey is not an actual geographical movement. Instead, it is a voluntary reconnection with the native roots which he has long avoided after fully recognizing his own hybridity. Its echo with the identity of the "West Briton" also lies in this point. Colonial discourse incorporates the western dimension of Ireland into the imperial territory through the title of "West Briton," while Gabriel's westward journey strips this dimension from colonial discourse and returns it to the cultural geography of Irish native tradition. The same notion of "the West" transforms from a designated identity label into a spiritual direction chosen by his own initiative. Following this spiritual direction, Gabriel looks out of the window and finds that the snow is "*falling on every part of the dark central plain,*" and also falling "*upon all the living and the dead.*" The grey world dissolves the binary opposition between the colonial and the native, while the heavy snow at this moment presents a brand-new vision after such dissolution. It erases the boundaries between center and margin, the living and the dead, colonial and native, and integrates all separated existences into a connected entirety. Precisely by dismantling the old binary identity and reimagining the relationship between the Self and the Other from an equal vision, the vernacular cosmopolitan stands rooted in the native land and opens outward to the world.

5. Conclusion

In summary, Gabriel's process of identity evolution exemplifies the postcolonial transformation of Irish intellectuals within the colonial context, transitioning from spiritual dependence to cultural self-awareness. He evolves from a rootless individual who imitates British elites and engages in false identification, to a hybrid subject navigating cultural in-betweenness, and ultimately to a vernacular cosmopolitan who transcends binary oppositions and embarks on a spiritual return. The snow covering Ireland at the story's conclusion symbolizes the inclusiveness and coexistence central to vernacular cosmopolitanism, elevating it into an allegory of Irish national identity. This allegory does not advocate a return to an idealized pre-colonial past or a simplistic reversal of colonial hierarchies; instead, it proposes a mode of belonging that embraces hybridity as the foundation for a more equitable and open community. For a nation grappling with colonial trauma, genuine identity liberation and spiritual renewal can only be achieved by confronting its hybrid history and cultural reality, reconstructing memories, and embracing the future.

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