

Essay on james joyce

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The years of James Joyce's life mark major transitions in world history, as well as in world culture. When he was born, in 1882, the worldwide transition from an agrarian way of life to the industrial paradigm was still in fits and starts. Wars were still fought hand-to-hand and on horseback. Literature was still primarily a mostly straightforward affair, as were the visual arts. Matters of perspective, the bailiwick of the modernist artists, were still yet to be the matter of much experimentation. However, the arrival of the Impressionist painters began to erode a unified perspective by considering how subjects might differ with a shift in time of day, or even lighting. When world events turned the assumptions of centuries on their heads, though, perspective would not stay far behind. Colonial empires began to crumble; European powers began to build alliances to stave off war. However, when that war came, in 1914, it no longer was fought with horses and swords. Tanks, mustard gas and more furious ammunition turned what had been a cause for civility, and even glory, into a bloodbath. The old ways, which focused on civility and dignity, gave way to a newer ethos that focused on material acquisition. The modernist viewpoint arose as a response to this loss of a universal perspective. Joyce was considered one of the leaders in the avant-garde movement that grew out of modernism in the early 1900s. Most famous for *Ulysses* (1922), a book in which the events of Homer's *Odyssey* are paralleled with a variety of different styles, most famously the "stream of consciousness" technique that he pioneered and perfected, Joyce set himself apart as a master of modernist writing. His other major works include *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939). James Augustus Aloysius Joyce was born on February 2, 1882, in Rathgar, a

suburb of Dublin. His father and grandfather had both married into wealthy families, so Joyce's life growing up was fairly comfortable, at least for a short time. An early portrait of Joyce made him view himself as "already taking issue with the world" (Bowker 14). However, at the age of five, Joyce was attacked by a dog, which led to cynophobia; he also feared thunder and lightning most of his life, because of an excessively worried aunt. Joyce's first published piece of writing was "Et Tu Healy" upon the demise of Charles Stewart Parnell. His father had been angered by the Catholic church's treatment of Parnell, as well as the consequent failure for Ireland to gain Home Rule. Joyce's father arranged for the printing of the poem, even sending a portion to the Vatican Library (Bowker). However, Joyce's father also slid into heavy drinking and an inability to manage his own finances. He had to declare bankruptcy and was let go from his job with a pension. This meant that Joyce was not able to enter private school without the charity of the Catholic church. Joyce's adolescence was key to the formation of his personality and attitudes; as a 14-year-old, he was initiated by a prostitute as his first sexual encounter. The "illicit nature of this encounter was perhaps responsible for defining the nature of the sexual act in his mind as an ambiguous mixture of furtiveness, fascination and shame" (Spinks 4). However, he was able to graduate from parochial school and enter University College Dublin in 1898. His first publication as an adult was a review of Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken* in the *Fortnightly Review*. Not only did he praise the play, but he learned enough Norwegian to write some fan mail to the author, and he received a thank-you response from the playwright (Bowker). He wrote several other articles and several plays then;

Unfortunately, the plays have been lost. He cast the plays with several of the friends that he made while studying at the university. Because Joyce viewed the French novel with something “between awe and qualified appreciation” (Fordham & Sakr 12), a literary future appeared to await him.

Upon graduation, though, Joyce initially planned to study medicine in Paris; however, he struggled with the technical language presented to him in French. He only stayed for a few months, as his family could ill afford to support him, and his mother was diagnosed with cancer. After her passing, his drinking worsened, and his home life became intolerable (Bowker). He barely made enough money to get by, teaching, singing and reviewing books to bring income in.

In 1904, Joyce met Nora Barnacle, who was employed as a chambermaid at the time. Their first date was June 16 of that year, a date that Joyce commemorated by making it the date for the events in *Ulysses*. The rest of 1904 did not go well for Joyce; he was beaten by a man with whom he had a misunderstanding in Phoenix Park; he was helped out of trouble by Alfred H. Hunter, a friend of his father's who brought him home and tended to his wounds. Hunter would be a model for Leopold Bloom, who was the protagonist of *Ulysses* (Spinks). Joyce also had an affair with Oliver St. John Gogarty, who was the model for Buck Mulligan from *Ulysses* (Bowker). Not long after some ugly altercations involving some students Joyce lived with, he and Nora eloped to the European Continent.

After failing to find work in Zurich and Trieste, Joyce and Nora settled in Pola, where he taught English to naval officers until he was expelled for being an alien in 1905. Then he found a job teaching English in Trieste and spent a

decade there. His first child, George, was born in 1906. Because Joyce's drinking was making it hard to support his family, he invited his brother Stanislaus to come to live with him and Nora, and to teach as well. Because of his trouble with money, he had trouble with Stanislaus the whole time Stanislaus lived with them.

While in Trieste, Joyce made a number of trips to Ireland in order to pursue his goal of becoming a cinema magnate. There were other moneymaking schemes afoot, such as putting together a plan to import tweeds from Ireland to Trieste. It was only his luck at borrowing money that kept him and his growing family from poverty; his sole income came from working at the Berlitz language school and tutoring private students.

In 1915, Joyce's financial fortunes finally took a turn for the better. Most of his students at the Berlitz school were Austro-Hungarian military personnel, or people headed to the military. They were mostly all drafted in 1915, and so Joyce had to move to Zurich to find work. In Zurich, he befriended Frank Budgen, who would become an important advisor for his writing; poet Ezra Pound; and the English publisher Harriet Shaw Weaver. She became Joyce's patron, and the money she would give him over the next three decades would enable him to stop teaching and instead focus on writing full time. This was when he published *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and began to make a dent in *Ulysses*. Zurich in World War I was a gathering point for artists and exiles from all over the continent, and it was intoxicatingly bohemian and multilingual. In 1919, Joyce briefly returned to Trieste; in 1920, though, he went to Paris to respond to an invitation from Ezra Pound. His plan was to spend a week in Paris; he would live there for the next two

decades.

In Paris, Joyce discovered that he was relatively famous as a writer in the avant-garde movement. Another hefty grant from Miss Weaver showed up and gave him more breathing room financially, allowing him to write full time. Maria and Eugene Jolas took care of him while he was writing *Finnegan's Wake*. Without the support from the Jolases or from Ms. Weaver, it is likely that his books would never have gotten published at all. He stayed in Paris until the threat of the Nazi occupation of France by the Nazi forces; he returned to Zurich but developed a perforated ulcer. He had surgery but went into a coma and never woke up. His wife, Nora, would survive him for 10 years.

Much has been made of the connection between Joyce and the church, particularly given Joyce's choice of schools relatively early in life. When Joyce left college, there was considerable controversy because he went in and said he would rather address God on his own terms. However, there are some scholars, such as Hugh Kenner and T. S. Eliot, who saw in Joyce's labors the perspective of an earnest Christian, with elements of Catholic belief lurking beneath the surface. There are others, such as Kevin Sullivan, who believe that Joyce had always been a Christian. Umberto Eco refers to Joyce as the ancient "episcopi vagantes" in the Middle Ages. These priests left a system of discipline behind them, not a particular cultural paradigm.

Dubliners was one of Joyce's first books. The Irish experiences in Joyce's life are crucial to understanding his literature, and this is particularly true in this book. While his country would provide all of the settings for his stories, as well as some thematic fodder for his own book, the stories in this novella

generally focus on one person, and the stories also include a sort of “epiphany,” also known as a quick consciousness of the “soul” of things in general.

Ulysses represents the apex of literary talent – and controversy – within Joyce. It started appearing in magazines, in serial form, in 1918, as Ezra Pound embraced the book's idea and put the most recent chapters in *The Little Review*. Unfortunately, some of the chapters received the ire from American translators, because of alleged obscenity. Also, the typical narrative promises, such as a conventional plot, are “important to underscore not only because they will be broken later on, but also because they provide an interesting contrast to the change in Joyce's basic conceptions of plot and significance in fiction” (Lawrence 15). This controversy, both aesthetic and structural, made it difficult for Joyce to find a publisher, but he finally signed a contract in 1922 – the same year that T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* came out. Because both authors were major in this part of the twentieth century, neither wants the other to gain more notoriety. *Ulysses* represents a statistical milestone, if nothing else but in terms of the use of so many different literary devices in one group of text. If you view Joyce's work as a “discrete continuum in which new departures in fact redeploy earlier habits in a different guise,” (Miles 1), then *Ulysses* is just the culmination of a group of trends. The novel sets up the stream of consciousness as well as several other literary methods.

One of Joyce's particularly important books was *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Unlike *Ulysses*, this book does not wander off as a novel into different narrative styles. Instead, this book is the fairly straightforward tale

of Stephen, a fictional substitute for Joyce himself. This novel was written in free indirect speech and follows the young man as he comes to rebel against the Irish and Catholic rules that undergirded his childhood. Eventually, Stephen starts to rebel against the Irish and Conventional norms but has little in front of him in the way of economic possibilities at home. In response, he decides to become an artist.

The story is all set in Ireland, and it has to do with different Irish issues of the day, such as the proper function of the Catholic church and the pursuit of independence. At the same time, the myth of Icarus and his father also appears prominently. In the Greek myth, Icarus' father is an architect who designs a labyrinth for King Minos; unfortunately, Theseus is able to solve the labyrinth and slay the Minotaur who lurks within. His ultimate punishment is to an island prison, where he makes wings for himself and his son. Unfortunately, his son flies too high; getting too close to the sun melts the wax holding his wings together, and the father has to watch the son tumble into the sea.

In the novel, Stephen (modeled on Joyce) also attends nice schools and university, despite the fact that his family faces financial turmoil. Ultimately (also like Joyce), Stephen decides to leave behind the bonds of morality, family, religion and nationality. He undergoes four transitions throughout the book. The first is from sheltered child to intelligent student. The second ends his innocence, when he has sex with a prostitute. The third temporarily allies him with the church, as he hears Father Arnall's sermon on hell and death, which changes him from a debauch to a pious Catholic. The final transition occurs when he changes from being extremely pious to being devoted to

beauty and art. Much like Joyce, Stephen is offered entry to the Jesuit order, but he refuses it. He changes to a mature artist by the time he leaves college behind (Fordham).

Stephen's father Simon is entangled in his own nostalgia, to the point where he has difficulty functioning in normal society. Simon is a symbol for the weight that Stephen's nationality and family place upon him, keeping him from achieving his own autonomy as easily. Simon represents those parts of Stephen's identity against which he feels he has to rebel. When Simon visits Cork with Stephen, the reader sees that Simon has simply ruined his own life and, rather than solving his problems, just continues to drown them in nostalgia and alcohol.

Emma is the girl for whom Stephen has an intense attraction, even though he does not know her particularly well. When he sees her, he senses a powerful response within himself. The very first poem Stephen writes is to her, even though the reader knows virtually nothing about her, even when the novel finally comes to an end (Milesi). She symbolizes one extreme of the spectrum of the feminine, and Stephen only appears to be able to see the extremes - the pure and unapproachable women, like Emma, or the impure, common prostitutes like the ones he uses at Belevedere.

One of the important themes of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is the development of autonomous consciousness. The stream of consciousness technique is one of the most famed in the book; it directly shows the sensations and thoughts that travel through the mind of a character, instead of describing the events of the book from the outside perspective of a narrator. This makes the book the actual story of the growth of Stephen's

consciousness from the inside. As the novel progresses, the words, sentences and paragraphs become more logically sequenced, and thought streams become not only more complex but also more logical. Stephen's awareness of the things around him grows with each transformation; the only flaw is his blind trust in the church, which does not fade until the last chapter of the story, when he reaches rationality - and adulthood (Rabate). The elements that most specifically mirror the life of Joyce are Stephen's difficult relationship with his family, culture and religion; his obsession with linguistic aesthetics; and his insistence on creating his own ideas of beauty. The book makes it clear that the expression of genius takes a considerable amount of work and sacrifice; the daily struggles that Stephen faces make that clear. Indeed, it is worth wondering, as Lacan and others did, whether Joyce was in fact psychotic. "The possible diagnosis of Joyce's psychotic structure can be seen as the result of several related factors: a systematic linguistic deregulation, a reknitting of the four circles providing a new place for an ego that occupies a crucial but fragile position since it depends entirely upon language and the determination of the structure by language experienced as raw material but produced outside the social norms of accepted meanings" (Rabate 10). Leaving social norms behind has long been a corollary of psychosis; the degree to which this was true for Joyce is still up for debate.

What makes this stream of consciousness so effective in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is that the stream of consciousness shifts as the main character ages. Early on, the chapters are told in the voice of a confused young boy living at a strict Jesuit school. As the novel progresses, so does

the language. When he talks about his visits with prostitutes as a teenager, his voice is clearly different. His later progressions, from wanting to enter the priesthood to realizing that the priesthood is not for him but, rather, life as a “ priest of eternal imagination, transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life” (Joyce), his voice changes again. These shifts show a distinct attempt on the part of Joyce to represent each step of the development of consciousness through language. The first page sounds like what a child would say: “ When you wet the bed first it is warm then it gets cold. His mother put on the oilsheet. That had the queer smell” (Joyce). As the story progresses, the objects of the character’s meditation grow in complexity. At the beginning, such words as “ green” and “ maroon” undergo repetitive consideration; later on, though, as the character’s mind expands, the meditation changes form the simply visual to more abstract considerations like “ home, “ “ master,” “ aesthetic,” “ lyrical,” “ Christ,” and “ dramatic.”

This stands in stark contrast with many of the other novels in which the life of an artist is represented. Whether one looks at Dickens’ David Copperfield or John Irving’s The World According to Garp, the narrator is solidly ensconced far enough away from the action to speak with a degree of objectivity. Whether the story is told from the first or third person, there is a definite lacuna between the narrator and the action. This gives the narrative a cohesiveness that makes it easier to understand, but it also means that the reader experiences very little of the fear that went into the actual experiences of the story. In Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, the narrator actually uses the perspective of childhood to narrate childhood perspective.

The closest Dickens comes, in contrast, is sending Ebenezer Scrooge back, through the agency of the Spirit of Christmas Past, to see himself living life as a child. *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* takes a tack that is almost cinematic in its representation of reality.

Another implication of this use of narrative is that there is very little external perspective that the reader can use to form any judgments about Emma Bovary. This makes Joyce's writing mirror Flaubert's much more than other novelists, who have taken pains to give their readers much more ancillary information about the protagonist. When *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* spins to a close, for example, the reader is left with entries from Stephen's diary. In the next to last one, he says, "Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race" (Joyce). However, Joyce does not elaborate, before the novel's close, whether that actually comes to pass. Instead, the reader is just left to wonder. After all, Stephen's last name is Dedalus, so it is possible that he might have made his dreams come true; however, it is just as possible that he might have ended up splashing down into the metaphorical sea of failure.

The notion of the stream of consciousness, presented without much in the way of commentary, would become one of the more popular narrative forms in the twentieth century. William Faulkner, in particular, was one of the earliest practitioners of the form. *As I Lay Dying*, in particular, shows the power of narration that goes inside the mind of the character. Even remaining true to the notion of "showing" rather than "telling" the details of the story pales in comparison with the visceral truths available from reading

a stream of consciousness. The problem with reading stream of consciousness narration, as opposed to more traditional storytelling, is that interpretation becomes more problematic. Going back to Dickens, that era of narrative insists on wrapping up stories with a very clear meaning. There is little ambiguity to the outcomes of Pip, Sydney Carton, Charles Darnay, Oliver Twist or David Copperfield. The modern era, though, is not one of certitude. Instead, it has been one of the splintering of meanings. It is true that there are still writers who punch out stories that wrap up the plot and explain what everything means. However, there are also many writers who refuse to do that, who place the task of interpretation on the reader.

As a result of this trend, there were several thinkers who even began to rule the author out of the entire creative process. Rather than view the author as the sole provider of meaning in a work of literature, it became more common to look at the reader's response to a text and even to look at the reader response as more important than authorial intention. Such thinkers as Roland Barthes even sought to remove the term "author" from literary analysis at all, instead branding anyone who comes into contact with a work of literature as an independent "scriptor." This takes the idea of the text away from the written word and converts it into a set of ideas. In the case of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the ideas for the story came into Joyce's mind and exited through his semiotic filter onto the page, but each person who encounters the text now views it through his very own filter. So, for two different readers, *Portrait* could take on two very different sets of meanings. Because one's semiotic filter changes over time, the book could have two very different sets of meanings for the same reader, taken at two

different points in life. One of the hallmarks of modernism is this multiplicity of meanings, the idea that the same work can, and even should, mean different things for different consumers of the text.

The novel also details the dangers of extremism in matters of religion. Because he grows up in a family that is devoutly Catholic, Stephen begins life with an absolute belief in the tenets of the church. When he is a teenager, this leads him to a life of extremes, whether it involves the repeated use of prostitutes and overt denial of religion, or his frantic return to extreme piety. Ultimately, though, he realizes that both extremes are harmful and false. Stephen eventually decides that he doesn't want a life of complete debauchery, but he also does not want the austere extremes of religion for his life, because they do not permit him a full life as a human being. When he sees the little girl walking at the beach, he sees her as a symbol of pure goodness and of the joys of a fully lived life; as a result, he decides to embrace humanity and celebrate life.

Ultimately, the decision to become an artist, for Joyce, means isolation from friends, family, faith and culture, so that he can practice his art. His goal is to give the community that he abandoned a voice, to "forge in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race" (Joyce 212). He recognizes that his community is a part of him that he cannot abandon. While he might exile himself from it, he writes to serve it. This form of service is quite different from what novelists had seen as their duty in prior centuries. The shift that came with the modernist paradigm is that the service became one of providing opportunities to interpret reality, instead of providing ready-made interpretations for the consumers to absorb. While it is true that that

sort of prepackaged literature is still popular, the modernist shift, as typified in Joyce and others, turned the focus away from the protagonist and where, perhaps, it has belonged all along - on the consumer.

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