"dubliners" and "kew gardens": modernism in woolf's and joyce's works

‘[T]he modern period […] begins really with the late nineteenth [century], when the sense of the passing of a major phase of English history was already in the air.’ Indeed, when we discuss ‘ modern’ in terms of literature this tends to be a reference to modernism, which was a reaction in writing to sudden and rapid changes occurring across Europe in the late 19th and early 20th century; change most concentrated in metropolitan cities. Many in the modern period felt these rapid changes in technology, industrialism and social mobility to be negative, seeing the city as desolate and isolating, as demonstrated in Hornes’ reference to ‘ crook-backed chimney pots’ and ‘ broken-windowed houses.’ Modernist writers like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, whose work I will discuss in this essay, attempted to encapsulate these changes through their writing with a departure from traditional forms and linearity; experimenting with more fractured and disarrayed style to reflect the changing world. Where the previous generations of writers had used the city as ‘ the backdrop against which these writers’ characters acted out their lives,’ the city for the modernists played a more foregrounded role. Modernists such as Joyce and Woolf represented metropolitan city life predominantly through its impact on their characters as well as vice versa, personifying the city in an attempt to conceptualize and understand it with familiar characteristics. Through this method, whilst metropolitan life was in some ways vibrant and promising, modernist writers predominantly expressed the feeling of instability and anonymity that the ‘ new’ metropolitan life represented for them.

Bobby Seal asserts in the article Woolf at the Door that cities in the modern period became ‘[M]ore than accidental meeting places and crossing points.

They were generative environments of the new arts, focal points of intellectual community,’ or in simpler terms, the new city held great promise. Throughout Joyce’s Dubliners, characters frequently hope have ambitions or an epiphany which is almost never fulfilled or realized. For example in Araby, the young boy waits all evening to attend the bazaar, and upon arriving finds that it is closing, whilst in Eveline, Eveline considers eloping with her lover but at the close of the story abandons her lover Frank at the docks. This provides a perfect metaphor to represent metropolitan life. The new modern city promises to be progressive and exciting in its advancements, but in reality the rapid growth in the cities often left people feeling a ‘ disconnection, detachment, even alienation from all local and particular ties.’ The best example of this metaphor is exemplified in Joyce’s story A Little Cloud. Little Chandler at the opening of the story is imbued with anticipation for his meeting with Gallaher:

‘ Little Chandler’s thoughts ever since lunchtime had been of his meeting with Gallaher, of Gallaher’s invitation and of the great city of London where Gallaher lived.’

In the antithesis between the adjective ‘ little’ preceding Chandler’s name and the ‘ great’ preceding ‘ London,’ Joyce contrasts the city and the man, setting up the promise of London for Chandler, which he hopes will raise him out of his uninspiring and unfulfilled life. The repetition of ‘ Gallaher’ here also establishes Gallaher as an emblem of the city and all the promise it holds, later highlighted by the further ‘ contrast’ Chandler feels between him and Gallaher. He states that ‘ if you wanted to succeed you had to go away. You could do nothing in Dublin,’ again seeing the metropolis of London as a

kind of Promised Land of opportunity. However, Chandler in fact already lives in Dublin, the largest city in Ireland, and the reader quickly gets the feeling that London will be equally as unfulfilling and disappointing; a conclusion affirmed by Gallaher’s actual presence in the story, where Chandler brushes off his sense of disillusionment towards Gallaher and the vulgarity he notices in him as perhaps a ‘ result of living in London.’ Whilst Chandler here willingly dismisses this, the reader picks up on the fact that if his vulgarity is associated with London, the city cannot possibly hold all the promise Chandler hopes. Similarly, Gallaher’s opening dialogue is somewhat fractured and erratic, ‘ well, and how have you been pulling along since I saw you last? Dear God how old we’re getting,’ leaving no space for Chandler to respond and presenting the man as unstable and fickle. Despite, or perhaps because of Chandler’s faith in him, we are disappointed by Gallaher as readers. His hurried manner and erratic dialogue make him seem insincere, and we are left wondering whether Chandler’s ‘ tears of remorse’ at the close of the story are for his imprisonment in Dublin or his disappointment in Gallaher, who for him represented the promise of the metropolitan London. This story therefore provides a perfect metaphor for Joyce to represent the city through Gallaher; a man who in theory is exciting and successful, but in reality is superficial and disappointing.

One of the most notable features of modernist writing is in its style, which often rejected Victorian values of chronology and traditional narrative in mimesis of the new rhythms of metropolitan life. In discussion of Virginia Woof’s work, Seal states in his article, ‘ Woolf evolved a new approach to the use of rhythm in her writing too; the pace of life in a modern city was

disorientating and intense.’ Woolf represents metropolitan life by trying to mimic its rhythms and pace through her style and structure. Examining Kew Gardens for instance, the reader passes through the minds of a number of different characters in quick succession, disabling them from really knowing the characters before their attention is diverted to something else. Whilst Woolf does provide some specifics about the characters, ‘ rosy-cheeked,’ ‘ nimble,’ ‘ in the prime of youth,’ these qualities are all superficial and to the reader these people remain simply people. In Misperceiving Virginia Woolf, James Harker comments that ‘ cinema is recreated in the image of the city,’ and indeed Woolf here creates a cinematic effect of walking down a city street, an experience during which one only observes snippets of other people’s lives without any prior information about them. It should perhaps be noted here that by representing metropolitan life this way, Woolf does not impose a sense of judgement on the reader about city life, firstly as she believed in the removal of the author from the text, and secondly because her structural choice and rhythm mediated through her characters, merely reflects the pace of metropolitan life; presented to the reader who in turn makes their own judgement.

Horne’s depiction of houses ‘ staring’ at each other is a personification which is symbolic of the modern fear of constant surveillance, and indeed Joyce employs a similar image in Araby of houses that ‘ gazed at one another.’ Technological and industrial advancement in the modern period allowed people to travel to places with more ease, enabled telephone communication, and brought masses of people into the cities. Such advancement is something the modernist writers of the period could not

ignore, and whilst one might anticipate these changes to be received positively, these writers often presented metropolitan life as suffering because of them; increased population ironically inducing feelings of anonymity and hindering communication. This is again something represented through Woolf’s characters in Kew Gardens, all of whom share a lack of communication with one another. This seems best exemplified in the married couple’s exchange, in which the two seem on entirely different wavelengths:

‘ For me, a square silver shoe buckle and a dragonfly-‘ ‘ for me, a kiss.’

Not only here are their minds turned to different subjects, but the dash here indicates an interruption, the wife not even pausing to consider what her husband has said. If this is indeed a metaphor for the lack of communication in metropolitan life, we must pause to consider why this lack of communication is apparent. Whilst Woolf’s story is set in gardens rather than the city streets, Kew Gardens are in London and are cultivated by man and could therefore be seen as a metaphor for the city streets. For instance, her opening description of the flowers in the garden is incredibly vibrant and bursting with color:

‘[F]rom the red, blue, or yellow gloom of the throat emerged a straight bar, rough with gold dust and slightly clubbed at the end.’

The description of the flowers here borders on garish, with a multitude of colors and shapes presented to the reader in quick succession. The intense and overwhelming properties of the flowers in the garden can therefore be seen as Woolf’s representation of mass media which grew rapidly in her era

in the sense that they provide a distraction in the story, ‘ the ponderous woman looked through the pattern of falling words at the flowers,’ just as mass media did in the city. As Rechniewski puts it, ‘ how is the writer to compete with the siren call of the mass media?’ This potential metaphor for the city is a representation of metropolitan life which opposes Hornes’ apocalyptic and desolate image of the city; by contrast, the flowers are symbolic of life and excitement. However, what lies behind this image is in the implication that the flowers are the distraction at the root of the lacking communication in the story, again accentuating Woolf’s use of character to mediate on metropolitan life.

Character is not just presented in humans, however. In trying to encapsulate the city, modernist writers often lent human qualities to buildings and vice versa, presenting the modern city as uniform and bleak. This returns us to Hornes’ depiction of the city, ‘ broken-windowed houses grow crazed with staring at each other out of countenance, and crook-backed chimney-pots in cowls turn slowly round with a witch-like mutter,’ which shares an affinity with some of Joyce’s presentations of Dublin. In A Little Cloud, for instance, Chandler describes a row of houses as ‘ stunted,’ saying ‘ they seemed to him a band of tramps, huddled together along the river-banks.’ In this instance, the personification of the houses as ‘ tramps’ indicates that they are unwanted, or a nuisance; a quality which expresses the animosity and disgust towards the new cities. Similarly, qualities of the city are reflected in human character, where for instance in A Painful case, Mr Duffy’s face is described as wearing ‘ the brown tint of Dublin streets.’ Immediately, we are given the impression that the city has affected the man, and not in a positive

way, with the color ‘ brown’ being indicative of uniformity whilst also the color of the bricks of the houses in the story. This merging of man with city has the effect of depersonalizing the characters and emphasizing the anonymity of metropolitan life, whilst simultaneously the personification of the city creates the impression of being under constant surveillance. These seemingly conflicting presentations of metropolitan life work in harmony because one can always be watched by a crowd in the city yet remain without identity and anonymous.

The metropolitan city was widely seen by many as a negative thing; ‘ the pace of life in a modern city [being] disorientating and intense.’ In an attempt to stabilize what seemed so unstable, it was the task of modernist writers like Joyce, T. S Eliot, and Virginia Woolf to invent new ways in writing to attempt to embody metropolitan life and the rapid change of the city around them. Whilst literary techniques like stream of consciousness and disruption of chronology were a key way in which these writers achieved this effect, the metropolitan city is most effectively represented through character, a familiar outlet to every reader. The true reaction towards the metropolitan city in the modernist period can therefore be read in the behavior and actions of the characters in the period’s literature.