

The Metanarrative of James Joyce's *Ulysses*

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Abstract:

James Joyce's *Ulysses* is the magnum opus of the giant Irish writer which has gained its reputation as a behemoth in the era of Modern literature and it acts as a guiding light to many Modernist movements. However, this novel is also a text which is extremely renowned because of its intricate obscurity. But despite its repute of obscurity, it is in fact one of the closest books which reflects the true nature and spirit of human soul ever written. It is a novel of anguish, happiness, music, smiles, flesh, blood, pain etc.; a great symphony of human voices. As an avant-garde, the novel is devoid of any kind of plot, it hardly has any grand unifying story that is tied with neat threads, one is not sure where the characters are because one flits in and out; there's bits and dialogues, there are bits of descriptions and bits of Joyce's extraordinary erudition. The purpose of the paper is to highlight the evolution of Joyce's writing style and also showing how his writing not only represents the age but also is ahead of it.

Key Words: Modern/Modernist; Avant-garde; Plot; Writing style

In the Western Literary Canon, the novel that has gained the reputation of being the most difficult and dangerous is *Ulysses*, by the Irish writer, James Joyce (Birmingham *The Most Dangerous Book*). It is surprising to note that this book actually has its roots in children's literature. In fact not just this book, but many other canonical works of the Western tradition are really rooted in juvenile fiction: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is an adventurous story of a boy; the greatest dramatic play, *Hamlet* is in a sense a ghost story; *Moby Dick* is a fishing tale; Goethe is said to have encountered the Faust Story for the first time as a puppet show. Joyce actually admitted that his inspiration actually came from Charles Lamb's children's adaptation, *The Adventures of Ulysses*, which he had read at a very early age (McKenna 97). Hence the novel's title is *Ulysses* and not *Odysseus* and to this day the plot line of *Ulysses* remains

incredibly simple. It started out actually as a short story that he planned for the collection in the *Dubliners*. Broadly there are three main parts and here is the basic outline of the story: First, Leopold Bloom is around 30 years of age. He is part Jewish and an advertising canvasser. He leaves his house in the morning and spends the entire day roaming around the streets of Dublin and then finally returns home late at night. Second, Stephen Dedalus is a recent university graduate. He is an unsatisfied person, both with himself and his job as a teacher. He is trying to pursue his career as a writer. Third, Bloom's wife Molly is a semi professional singer. She is flighty in the sense that she commits adultery with her agent Blazes Boylan. That is it.

This novel, *Ulysses*, shares its difficulty and complexity with other modernist Avant garde works. The difficulty of it lies much more in the style of the writing than in its actual content. The novel also has a reputation for being obscene-

Mr. Bloom with careful hand recomposed his wet shirt. O Lord that little limping devil. Begins to feel cold and clammy. Aftereffect not pleasant. Still you have to get rid of it someway. They don't care. Complimented perhaps. (Joyce 668)

However, it really is the theme of paternity that is much more pervasive and strong in this novel than sexual love. Take for example the case of Shakespeare, the greatest writer of the Western Canon. He was very much interested in father-daughter relationship and mother-son relationships in his plays; notice in his *The Tempest*, there is the relationship between Prospero and Miranda that is so core to the story or in *King Lear*; and in *Hamlet* the emotional current that goes on inside the mind of the Prince of Denmark when he thinks of his mother, Gertrude. But Joyce on the other hand is mostly interested in father-son relationships and even more so the failure of the father and the breakdown of the patriarchal lineage that sustains not only families but also cultures (Benstock 12). There are so many examples from the novel to prove this point: Leopold Bloom's father has committed suicide; Bloom's son Rudy has died in infancy. Stephen Dedalus' father is an alcoholic ne'er-do-well, always away from home. Stephen himself is unmarried and has no children and cannot even imagine himself as a family man. But as an artist, Joyce is obsessed with the idea of literary father figures, but not so much as strong and challenging authors, against whom to revolt, but much more as a kind of enfeebled absentee father figure, no longer nourishing and challenging or inspiring to him as a writer. The failures of the fathers in

the novel fuel its pervasive sense of regret. Bloom is a figure of middle age regrets: he regrets his career, his marriage, his children or his lack of children. Stephen Dedalus' regrets are more monumental and even global. He was born in the wrong country, in the wrong religion, in the wrong century.

Stephen has a feeling of belatedness. He has come too late in the great story of the western literary tradition. And in a sense all artists have felt that they are belated. For example, in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (c. 1800 BC), the writer remembers an earlier, grander period, the period of the flood-time of the Utnapishtim. By the time Homer is writing his first epics, he feels that all the great heroic events were done in the centuries in the past, during the Trojan War period. But by 20th century a writer like James Joyce, feels centuries and even millennia of this sort of prior achievement that he can never really match up and he feels a great hand and a great weight of the past upon him. Stephen Dedalus has a famous line in the novel, he says, "History... is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake" (Joyce 377). And he means as much literary history as the whole national history of the conversation. Indeed Joyce is very much in touch with his historical predecessors. Like Voltaire, Joyce was educated by the Jesuits; he very much valued the intellectual rigour of their education. His experimental novel actually returns to the aesthetics of Aristotle as filtered through Thomas Aquinas, with the three unities of time, place and action. And in fact he is very respectful of unities of time and place (McKenna 212). The place is Dublin, Ireland; the time is a single day, June 16, 1904. And in fact the action is so compact that one can actually walk the streets and follow the path of the characters, as many devotees of Joyce actually do. Like Saint Augustine in his *Confessions*, James Joyce took himself as the principal subject of exploration. Stephen Dedalus is the younger James Joyce; Leopold Bloom is the middle age James Joyce (Bloom 2-3). And it is probably interesting to note that Augustine was James Joyce's middle name.

The Catholic master poet, Dante was really Joyce's favourite and that is the reason why we find the intense complexity of the writing, the intricately crafted texture of the epic. Everything is meaningful, everything is exactly at the right place, and everything is subject to layers and layers of interpretation (Reynolds 224-226). But also like Voltaire in the 18th century, Joyce felt that he had been failed by his Catholic father figures, so that they had lost faith in organized religion and also the centrality of Christianity in western civilization. There is an

anecdote that Joyce was once asked that he lost faith in the Catholic Church, had he become a protestant, Joyce replied something to the effect, “I have lost my faith, I have not lost my mind” (Sullivan 225). Joyce’s great struggle with the father figure involved Shakespeare. Shakespeare was that one English Language master figure that he felt he could do his oedipal revolt, the son against the father. In fact there is a whole chapter in *Ulysses* the *Scylla and Charybdis* episode, devoted to Stephen Dedalus’ theories of father-son themes in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (Kopcrak 6). Stephen himself is an updated version of *Hamlet*. Stephen is an intellectual, totally inside his own head forever thinking and thinking. Leopold Bloom, on the other hand is a sort of modern version of Shakespeare’s Falstaff character. He is a very flesh and blood creature, fully alive to the senses, indulging and enjoying wherever possible. The problem with Shakespeare is that he remains a shadowy figure, a remote absentee father, we don’t have a good biography of Shakespeare and so we are always looking for that personality in the sonnets and in the plays and we always feel that we come up empty in the search for that real, authentic Shakespeare.

Just like his favourite novelist, Leo Tolstoy, Joyce also used to research things and happenings a lot for accuracy of details. He poured over newspapers for June 16, 1904. He studied maps, and even claimed that, should the city of Dublin be wiped off the map, it could be rebuilt and recreated from his books (Adams 84). Again like Tolstoy, Joyce was a compulsive reviser, correcting and expanding his book, even in the Gallic books. Sometimes he put in as many as a 160 changes in editions in a single page. As a result the text grew third more than the original submission version, the supposed to be the final version for his publishers. Missing from this rundown of the greats of the western cannon is Virgil’s *Aeneid* and this is implausible in a sense because this is a standard school text, Joyce would have read the *Aeneid* like every other good school boy. But the point is that it is the epic with a very strongest sense of fatherhood, emphasizing the bloodline of Aeneas leading down to Julius and Augustus Caesar. And the *Aeneid* also is the epic of empire and part of the quandary of an Irishman, like Joyce at the beginning of the 20th century is that Ireland was still part of the British Empire at this point and Joyce felt that it was also subject to the Empire of the Catholic Church. So it is the part of the whole revolt against the idea of empire. He seems to have excluded that one canonic work most successively from his novel. In this sense then *Ulysses* becomes yet another example of the postcolonial novel before the term itself was invented (Farsi 3). Joyce is an Irishman, he is

working outside the mainstream of the English tradition and so he is writing back from the fringes. It is the other example of the lovely phrase invented by the critics, “the empire writes back” (Ashcroft Title).

It is interesting to note that Joyce, when he sat down to write *Ulysses*, also read Father Chaucer. He wanted to revisit Geoffrey Chaucer as he was writing *Ulysses* and indeed his character Molly Bloom can be said to have resemblances to Chaucer’s earthy, sexy character- the Wife of Bath. Many of James Joyce’s personal books have ended up at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Joyce had a copy of Chaucer, it was Skeat’s Student’s Edition, that Joyce had probably used it when he was a student at the university college Dublin. In his text of Chaucer, lo and behold, Joyce did not put marginalia in his books, like Samuel Taylor Coleridge did and Joyce did not even seem to underline. So the entire text of his Chaucer book is blank, with no personal notation. In a sense that is significant, because even though he read Chaucer, he was not really part of that mainstream Chaucerian tradition, the genealogy of great English writers that looked back to Chaucer as the Father of English poetry. Joyce’s status as a marginal character in Ireland comes out in his blank response to his Chaucer text. James Joyce lived and worked on *Ulysses* during a period of huge upheaval in Europe. The novel’s very last words actually cite the cities and dates of *Ulysses*’ composition. Those last words are “Trieste – Zurich – Paris, 1914-1921” (Joyce 995). That is, Joyce wrote entirely through the years of the First World War. When he started off, he was living with his family in Trieste, then a highly cosmopolitan port city, for the Austro-Hungarian Empire and then for safety they then moved to neutral Switzerland. Zurich at that time was greatly a polyglot city, crowded with other refugees, including the Dada artist Tristan Tzara and even Lenin from Russia was there. In fact the great English playwright Tom Stoppard has a play called *Travesties* (1974), set in Zurich, bringing out all these characters together, even has James Joyce as one of the central characters of the play.

Joyce and his family finally arrive in Paris as the fighting in the war is winding down and thus he will finish and complete the publication of *Ulysses*. This means that the action of *Ulysses* looks back from the war years to the pre-war year of 1904. Europe was at peace in 1904, people like Leopold, Molly and Stephen moved in a highly cosmopolitan world. All of which would be shattered along with confidence in national civilization itself by the Great War. In hindsight then World War 1 emerges as the Great Event of the early 20th century casting its shadow across the

decades to come, much as the Napoleonic war casted shadow across the early decades of the 19th century. Look at the writers Ernest Hemmingway, Thomas Mann, T.S.Eliot, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, Willa Cather, even J.R.R.Tolkein all were shaped as writers by this massive cultural dislocation, this psychological impact of the First World War. The 20th century writers like James Joyce felt that in a sense they had been failed by European civilization and their cultural father figures and yet they continue to feel the crushing weight of the dead past upon them and they could not actually do what their predecessors had done, they could at least experiment with new styles and with new artistic languages. And in a sense Joyce resembles some of the cubist painters like Pablo Picasso, and George Braque using their very complicated styles actually to represent rather simple everyday things: a guitar, a bowl of fruit. Then you look at composers like Igor Fyodorovich Stravinsky who needed to reinvent their musical idiom every time they wrote a new piece of music, so that Stravinsky would start with the fire bird, very much rooted in the Russian romanticism of Rimsky Korsakov and then go on to the daring *The Rite of Spring* (1913) but then also going forward to the Symphony of Songs written in a very neo-classical mode. And avant garde artists constantly reinvent themselves, there is restlessness, there is a need to do something new over and over.

If we go back to the beginning of the European tradition, we look at Saint Augustine's *Confessions* (397-400 AD). At the very beginning of the *Confessions*, St Augustine makes a great statement upon the central human problem. He talks about *inquietum est cor nostrum*- our heart is restless (Kotze 120). We have the *inquietum cor* (the unquiet heart). Now this is the problem for Augustine that he resolves in the course of his conversion to Christianity. In the 19th century, Friedrich Nietzsche will speak of a transvaluation of values (Howey 139) and in the Modernist period, *restlessness* is being transvalued into a virtue and no longer a vice as it was for St Augustine. Remember what Erich Heller said about Goethe's hero: "What is Faust's sin? Restlessness of spirit. What is Faust's salvation? Restlessness of spirit" (Watt 206). And so a great artist in the 20th century is even more so, as the paper has said before, not a single author. He is in restless pursuit of reinventing himself, finding new styles in new works. Joyce's trajectory as a writer is extraordinary, absolutely amazing. He starts off with rather straightforward naturalistic short stories in his collection called *Dubliners* (1914) and then he does the stylistically advanced bildungsroman, a coming of age novel *A Portrait of the Artist as*

a *Young Man* (1916); but then he surprises everyone with the landmark of stylistic expressionism, his *Ulysses* (1922) and then spent the rest of his career working on the outermost limits of linguistic experimentation in *Finnegans Wake* (1939).

Joyce's style represents a fusion of form and content. There is a lovely story that explains it as well. In his Paris apartment, James Joyce had a big picture on the wall, it was County Cork, his home county back in Ireland, when people would notice the picture and ask what it was, and he would say it is Cork. Then they would notice the frame and say what is the frame made of, and Joyce would say it is Cork. There is an element of form and content, the picture is of County Cork and the frame is made of Cork. And so this is very much the sort of style that we find throughout *Ulysses*. Let us take for example the novel's famous last chapter, Molly Bloom's monologue. It is stream of consciousness and so that is the subject the form is going to reflect that flowing, unpunctuated prose; there is no break in the flow of the stream of consciousness in its 40 odd pages. Molly Bloom is the original desperate housewife, who has not enjoyed sex with her own husband for the last 11 years. And so as she falls asleep late at night her memory flows together in a stream of consciousness at the very end of the novel she is merging together the streams of her first sexual experience at Gibraltar and the day when she accepted Leopold Bloom's marriage proposal. Here are the last words of the novel, Molly Bloom soliloquy:

“...yes and how he kissed me under the Moorish Wall and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes.”

Ulysses was published finally in Paris in 1922 with subscriptions from Ernest Hemmingway, William Butler Yeats, Andre Gide and Joyce became an instant literary celebrity throughout Europe and America. There is even a great story when a young man came up to him in Zurich and said, 'May I kiss the hand that wrote Ulysses?' Joyce replied, somewhat like King Lear, 'No, it did lots of other things too' (Ellmann 101). *Ulysses* also became notorious, ranking high among those books called obscene, blasphemous and subversive and enters that long and distinguished list such as *Decameron*, *Don Quixote*, *Candide*, and *Moby Dick* that were banned,

blacklisted in their own time and now masterpieces of the western canon. The burden of illegality actually persisted for a long time, it wasn't until 1933 in America that a US District Court lifted that ban on *Ulysses* in the United States and now of course we go to any bookstore, there is *Ulysses* on the shelf and it is routinely included in college courses. It is so hard for us to remember now what dangerous book it was at the time.

Even though it was criticized as obscene at the time, Joyce's writing is actually realism. When he talks about the sexual content of his characters' lives and thoughts, he is actually extending the kind of realism that he had already found in Stendhal and Tolstoy, taking them into the inner lives of the people and the realistic fantasies of his characters. If *Ulysses* is not fit to read, Joyce remarked, life is not fit to live (Pierce 243) When Joyce was asked what he would write after *Ulysses*, he replied, "I think I will write history of the world" (Flynn 207). He spent the next 16 years working on the ultimate example of literary experimentation in a book called *Finnegans Wake*, published towards the end of his life in 1939. The *Wake* as we call it is a night time book. Just as *Ulysses* is a day time book. And in a sense it descends into Stephen Dedalus' nightmare of history, it is the universal dream of the human race, very much written under the inspiration of Carl Jung's Universal Unconscious. The book contains all languages, at least 6 or 7 that we can identify, the plastic prose style described by one of his contemporaries as a wholesale safety pun factory. It is a vast encyclopedia of knowledge, language and everything, that put Melville to shame and in a sense it is the ultimate fulfillment of Goethe's call for a true world literature, all languages, all knowledge put together in this one single book. It is hard to find characters in *Finnegans Wake*; it absolutely defies expectations of the Western Literary Tradition. There is no plot, there are no single protagonist or antagonist in this story; everything is dissolved in this great sea, this great matrix of information and language and music. In fact Joyce said it is so much of a literature as a great symphony opera. But one of the characters, the archetypal character which does emerge is a woman, Anna Livia Plurabelle, is the name that we have for her. She is the archetypal woman, she is wife, she is mother, she is Goethe's eternal feminine as she is introduced in the last lines of *Faust's* Part 2. She is also the female fluidity principle, symbolized by Dublin's River Liffey: Anna Livia-River Liffey, and life returning to its source. Listen for example to this description of the woman as the river, the river as the woman; it is very much form and content one more time Cork and cork. It is to be noted that the long

poem as such dies with Milton, nobody has really tried to do a great long poem after *Paradise Lost*, but what is going to happen is that authors expressed their ambitions for a massive, complex, verbally beautiful work no longer in the epic poem but in the novel. So here one has in Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, the ultimate poetic expression, written as a novel but lyrical and inventive as a way we would expect an experimental poetry.

Like Shakespeare, in *The Tempest*, Joyce planned to end his writing career with a short simple book; he entitled it *On The Sea*. Just as Shakespeare intended it on the sea tale, Joyce intended to end his with a short economical condensed book *On The Sea*, instead he drank himself to death at age 58. And so *Finnegans Wake* remained a kind of artistic dead-end for literary experimentation with few followers. It was published in 1939, just before the outbreak of the World War 2 and so is very much at that end of the period modernism experimentation after the war was over. People were more practical and sensible; the kind of aesthetic aspiration and stylistic experimentation no longer seemed to be the route that writers wanted to take. It is not a work that reaches out to too much posterity, remember that is always very important a work or an artist have his followers on. One of the few writers that can point to have followers is Anthony Burgess, especially in his novel *A Clockwork Orange*, for example where Burgess has made up a language of the characters in his novel. Anthony Burgess was a great fan of Joyce, he wrote a lot about Joyce. He made a good study of Joyce called *ReJoyce*, rejoice about Joyce. It is a punning title as we would expect. And he also wrote and published book called *A Shorter "Finnegans Wake"*. It was a kind of an abridged version of *Finnegans Wake*, with a really excellent introduction by Anthony Burgess himself. Notice then that we have one more example of a canonical author who is very much exhausted the possibilities of his own chosen genre. Shakespeare, for example, has the last word on tragedy, after all what could follow after *King Lear*. Milton again used his *Paradise Lost* to close the book on the classical epic. A nobody can't really write a Homeric epic like *Paradise Lost*. They can only do it like Byron did in *Don Juan*, write a kind of comical anti-epic.

So it is *Ulysses* only that remains the inspiration for any writer who would come later with the ambition to write a big experimentation novel, rooted very much in human realism, including the interior experience of a human being, confronting a hostile universe. So in the 1920s after this immediate impact by Joyce's *Ulysses* we find Virginia Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway*

and William Faulkner in *The Sound and the Fury*, writing very much under the inspiration of Joyce's monumental novel. But notice that these Avant Garde works remain outsider novels by outsider writers. Virginia Woolf, great writer of the 1920s especially is a woman writer and sometimes lesbian. Then you have William Faulkner, the southerner; labeled even as a regional writer, when he is being given the Nobel Prize in 1950. So those who would follow wake in Joyce's tradition and achievement also carried that sort of stigma that they too write from the fringes, from the outside, not within the mainstream, because after all the novel has always been the bad boy genre of the western literary canon.

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