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A FORMAL MELANGE OF REALISM, MODERNISM AND SYMBOLISM WITH
REFERENCE TO JAMES JOYCE'S *DUBLINERS*

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ABSTRACT

The basic interpretation of realism, modernism and symbolism in James Joyce's works have gone unchallenged. Realism is the attitude of depicting the accurate, detailed, and unembellished aspect of actual life where modernism in literature is the rebellion against so called clear-cut storytelling and formulaic verse of the 19th century. Symbolism on the other hand is meant to represent something beyond the literal meaning. As a towering figure in 20th century literary world, Joyce is a colossus of modernist elements and is evidently known for his experimental use of language and exploration of new literary techniques and themes. An Irish short story writer, novelist, poet and literary critic, Joyce contributed to a significant extent and has left behind quite impressive impact on the readers. This paper aims to explore his narrative techniques with reference to *Dubliners*.

Keywords: Realism, Modernism, Symbolism, Language, Literature

The literary modernism goes back to the late 19th and early 20th century which finds its footprints significantly in European and American literature. It tends to break away from the traditional ways of writings as exemplified by Ezra Pound's maxim as "make it new" as it fostered new experimentation in art and literature. Among the modernists, Joyce's writings are located with mastery of language, his intentions to write about aspects of life that previously went unapproached. His *Dubliners* is rich in modernistic elements in terms of both form and content. His modernist themes of paralysis, death and loneliness are related to religious and political plights at the turn of the century. The techniques of epiphany, use of symbolism, dilution of plots and the alteration of narrative perceptions are remarkable features of modernistic approach in literature. Most of the character's confusion and resignation in *Modern Dublin* relate to the social context of the nation. As Mary Kiages rightly observes that "literature has stood the taste of time, that it speaks to all generations, and tells universal truths about human nature." (Kiages p-3)

Published in the year 1914, *Dubliners*, a collection of fifteen short stories, has been widely accepted as representative work of Joyce that describes the lives of the Dubliners covering lower to middle class families. Joyce reflects mostly the three important stages of life namely childhood, youth and adulthood. His exploration of apathetic condition of characters and psychological attitude to the then social context is revealed with different approach. Wielding of realism, modernism and symbolism have been Joyce's concern for the modern society prevailed by solitariness, alienation, paralysis and death. By the end of the 19th century to 20th century, there was a rapid and visible changes in industrialization and urbanization leading to severe impact on the

material and spiritual life. Complexities and hardships have changed the psychological aspects of the human beings that they confront with alienation and isolation.

Bradbury rightly observes: 'Modernist literature is a modernizing literature of the world and is an international literature for rapid industrial development, advanced technology, increasing urbanization, secularization and diversity of social life.' (Bradbury,1993, p.39) Most of the modernist features are recognizable in *Dubliners* on two aspects. At first the hardship and suffering of women, children and awful life of an individual are depicted which lead to realistic approach of literature. Secondly, he seeks to go through the reality of human nature and emotion. Eveline struggles hard to find a way of life. She feels the absence of her mother and takes care of her siblings with lots of difficulties. In this regard Joyce's idea of solitary experimentalism is vividly visible. Most of the stories in *Dubliners* have shaped the writings of Joyce to a new era of modernism. In *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, a semi-autobiographical novel, the modernist techniques connect the character of Stephen to Joyce, the artist himself. Among them the stream of consciousness, plot, individual versus universal themes find notes to a significant extent. A free flow of sense runs through Stephen's unrestrained conscious thought as an essential element of modernism.

The modernist plot of *Dubliners* is less concerned with plot than character, mood and impression which is the significant characteristic of modernism. The opening story in *Dubliners* can be analyzed as a typical example delivering a simple plot that can be easily summarized. The young unnamed boy reflects upon the impending death of his friend and mentor a catholic priest Father Flynn who died reportedly of paralysis. The narrator here confronts with the idea of unspecified sin by the priest.

Joyce primarily works within the genre of realist fiction. Realism originates in the 19th century, led by Balzac in France, George Eliot in England and William Dean Howells in America to designate a recurrent mode in various eras and literary forms of representing human life and experience in literature. Contrary to naturalism, 'realism on the other hand, is said to represent life as it really is. (Abrahams, p-333) During 19th century writers espoused their own ideas to depict the real world without romanticizing it. In *Dubliners*, Joyce has attempted to emphasize the issues affecting the middle class. Most of the stories mark this trend of giving importance on the reality of the society which is aimed to arouse or to make others see a development. Peter Childs remarks on the reality aspect of the literature that "gives the impression of recording or reflecting faithfully an actual way of life." (Childs 01)

Besides the realistic approach of the story, symbolism is held as a significant mode of expression which is the first manifestation of modernist literature. The prime intention of the 19th century symbolists is to depict the first changing cityscapes and landscapes due to urbanization and industrialization. It 'imposes new rhetoric, whose essential principles are; ambiguity, irony, pure poetry, the suggestion, the discursive character and more.' (Pederson 2015:1)

It is undeniable that contrary to the realists some others opine *Dubliners* as the symbolic writing as various examples of symbols have proved it. Symbols are objects, characters, figures and colors to represent concepts or ideas. In *Dubliners* the use of windows induces the possibilities of further events or encounters to happen. It is clearly visible that the narrator in *The Sisters* looks into a window each night apprehending the priest father Flynn's impending death. "There was no hope for him his time: it was the third stroke. Night after night I had passed the house, it was vacation time and studied the lighted square of the windows: and night after night I had found it lighted in the same way, faintly and evenly." (Joyce-p-3) Additionally, the most two important characters Eveline and Gabriel turn to windows when they reflect on their situations in *The Araby* the narrator keeps his watch from 'In the evening my aunt took me with her to visit the house of morning. It was after sunset; but the windowpanes of the houses that looked to the west reflected the tawny gold of great bank of clouds." (*Dubliners*, p-8,9)

Joyce has used symbols to boost the stories and goes to the extent of saying his intentions indirectly in the collected stories of *Dubliners*. In *The Sisters*, he deals with the problems of Catholicism. The stricter rules in the system affect father Flynn when goes crazy due to rules of the church and stress, placed upon him. Joyce connects Father Flynn to the church when he intends to expose the burden of harsh and stricter rules on him

and causing him mentally ill. In the introductory part of *Dubliners* Joyce remarks that “the people of Ireland had experienced eight centuries of domination by England. The evils of colonialism are quite familiar to us by racism, lack of political representation, suppression of indigenous culture, repression of religion, exploited labor and crushing poverty.” (Joyce p-XII)

Religious symbolism reigns its footprints in most of cases in *Dubliners*. For instance, ring is used as a symbol of marriage whereas clay is also symbolic for death. For use of solitariness and celibate life the symbol of the prayer book is used. Joyce’s stories deal with the theme of desire for escape and exile. The desire for escape is symbolized through exotic Argentina whereas the theme of escape is represented through the outskirts of Dublin in *An Encounter*, as one of the landmark stories of the modernist literature. In the story Joyce addresses the taboo subjects as well as the boredom and disappointing attitudes of people in the area. Visibly the theme of paralysis or immobility occurs as a motif throughout most of his stories. Joyce is a lifelong critic of Catholicism especially the kind of practice the religious institutions used to have. According to him the elderly Father Flynn is a priest who is characterized as holding obsolete practices irrelevant to the society. He is portrayed as old fashioned and physically deteriorating contrary to our expectation. Another theme of freedom is exposed when the narrator comes to know the death of the priest. “We blessed ourselves and came away. [...] My aunt waited until Eliza sighed and then said- ‘Ah, well has gone to a better world.’ Eliza sighed again and bowed her head in assent. My aunt fingered the stem of her wine glass before sipping a little.” (Joyce. p- 10)

Father Flynn’s stroke causing paralysis is a strong symbol of end of the movement. The course of Catholicism doesn’t suit to the changing times as intended by the writer. Since Father Flynn is the representative of Catholicism his paralysis indicates the deteriorating religious attitudes and practices to the present norms of the society. So called excessive rituals of the church is a matter of concern which finds a place through the symbol of paralysis. The narrator states this condition when he observes that “he had often said to me: ‘I am not long for this world’ and I had thought his words idle. Now I knew they were true. Every night I gazed up at the window I said softly to myself the word paralysis.” (Joyce. P.03)

Intermingling of life and death is symbolized as dusk and nightmare in *Dubliners* when the writer intends to present before the readers a half-life with degraded conditions of people in Dublin. There is no sign of sunlight or dazzling landscape used rather dusk and nightmare indicate the life of dire and doomed throughout the stories. The stillness of the night prevails when the writer observes, “it was late when I fell asleep. Though I was angry with old Cotter for alluding to me as a child I puzzled my head to extract meaning from his unfinished sentences. In the dark of my room I imagined that I saw again the heavy grey face of the paralytic.” (Joyce.p.05)

Joyce’s another story *Araby* is replete with rich symbols which serves as allusions to the autobiographical events. In most of cases religious symbols assist as the major theme of the incongruity of the secular and sacred. At the very outset the word ‘blind’ is symbolized as an adjective to describe North Richmond Street related to its location. The symbol indicates that the street is about the dead end of the city, Dublin. In fact, James Joyce attended the Christian Brother School at Richmond. “North Richmond Street, being blind, was a quiet street except at the hour when the Christian Brothers School set the boys free. An uninhabited house of two storey stood at the blind end, detached from its neighbors in a square ground. The other houses of the street conscious of decent lives within them, gazed at one another with brown imperturbable faces.” (Joyce. p.26)

The title *Araby* is symbolic in the sense that it represents an ideal of life. It is interspersed with romance and beauty for the author. Above all it is a harsh reality that romantic ideals remain away and compressed by the materialistic attitude. The title doesn’t deliver a conventional style of storytelling, rather it also refers to the subconscious state of dream and desire. Joyce’s cherished image of Mangan’s sister is bright example of revolt against dull and doomed life in *Dubliners*. In this modernist story Joyce uses the symbol of light and darkness at various situations where the story starts with reference to darkness. The boys also played in the dark muddy road behind the houses. Another reference is there that the boys are back to the street where light illuminates the area. Joyce mentions that “the short days of winter came dusk fell before we had well eaten our dinners.” (Joyce, p.27)

Joyce, as an Irish boy, executes a wonderful story in *Araby*, gets infatuated with a girl and indicates that how the world corrupts the pure and spoils the idealistic approach to life. The word *Araby* is said to be coming of age story which is all about a boy's relocation from the innocent world to the world of experience. It reminds us of *Arabian Nights* in which the princess escapes death by telling stories. *Araby* is about a boy's expectations gaining momentum but hurled by the harsh reality. Joyce, a realist who tries to portray the drab and dirty atmosphere of Dublin. It's all about an innocent boy and his bitter experience leading to reality.

A Mother is a story which centers round a mother's attempt to secure a role in a series of concerts. At the outset death is symbolically depicted in the narrative. Again Mr. Kearney had a 'great brown beard' (Joyce.p. 91) in which the color brown symbolizes decay or death through which a lifeless bond is portrayed. Ultimately the lack of high presence in the auditorium in which her daughter has to perform in the show indicates barrenness or inactivity in the life of Dubliners. Both the mother and the daughter found the auditorium dead and lifeless. In most of cases Joyce adds allusions to death and Irish Revival. Apart from this the story is attached to the aspect of general public in Dublin. "The story line focusses on her intention of bolstering her daughter's musical career but subsequently failing." (Fagnoli, Gillespie: 65-66) Again the mother incidentally shows her motherly quality when "we ultimately realize that her daughter Kathleen voices all other children of *Dubliners'* mothers who also suffer from a certain kind of paralysis." (Paige. p. 329)

The theme of paralysis is portrayed through the main character of *A Mother* in which Mrs. Kearney strongly relies on her daughter to come to the profession of music leading to some people's remarks that she has no future in this respect. Additionally, marriage is portrayed with no signs of positivity. Both of them lack romance which is expected from conjugal life.

Most of the stories in *The Dubliners* deal with lives of the working class in a specific and limited period of time. In spite of speculations, the protagonists portrayed in the stories relate to fears, insecurities and dreams still amaze the readers. This Joycean collection of stories are remarkable success of the author that speak middle class Irish masses. Joyce is known for his experimental use of language, new literary techniques and use of symbols portraying reality of Irish society. In fact, his works are formal melange of realism, modernism and symbolism that have profound impact on the next generations.

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