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## JOYCE'S DEVELOPMENT AS AN AUTHOR AND HIS EXPERIMENTS WITH THE EPISTOLARY FORM

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### ABSTRACT

The article examines Joyce's development as an author and his changing use of the epistolary form. Joyce is interested in representing character subjectivity and uses free indirect thought and focalization to do so. Joyce often focalizes through and reports on the thoughts of a single character, replicating some of the traditional functions of the letter in fiction.

### KEYWORDS

Letters and letter writing, epistolary form, epistolary tradition, consciousness, character, interior monologue.

### INTRODUCTION

James Joyce's Ulysses reflects the changes taking place in the way people communicated at the turn of the century in a busy city like Dublin. Stephen sends his roommate Mulligan a telegram to cancel a meeting,

and Leopold Bloom makes a telephone call to the office of the Evening Telegraph, which illustrates the other

characters' attitudes towards him. But letters and letter writing are what play a central role in the life of the characters in the novel, because throughout the day, Bloom and others read letters, write letters, and receive letters: Bloom corresponds with Martha Clifford; Mr. Deasy wants to publish his letter on hoof and mouth disease in the paper; the Citizen and his cohorts at Barney Kiernan's read letters of application written by barely literate hangmen; and, perhaps most importantly, Molly Bloom receives a letter from Blazes Boylan, confirming their rendezvous at four o'clock in the afternoon. The epistolary form continues to be an important thematic and structural element in *Finnegans Wake*; few letters appear in Joyce's early works, such as *Dubliners* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Part of Joyce's progress as a writer, then, is his decision to use the epistolary form extensively in his later fiction.

In *Ulysses*, Joyce begins to use interior monologue in his writing, allowing character thoughts to be directly recorded in the text, making the epistolary form seem superfluous. Instead of abandoning the letter, however, Joyce uses it to explore the way language fails to represent subjectivity, rejecting the character element of the epistolary tradition and disrupting the relationship between letters and external readers. In *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce moves away from questions of subjectivity and focuses on questions of language and experience; he experiments with the narrative and

object elements of the epistolary tradition and ultimately uses the letter to question the impact language has on reality. Letters in Joyce's fiction can also be seen as a *mise en abyme*, but he exceeds other modernist writers' use of the epistolary form by directly equating the letter with his own art in *Finnegans Wake*.

*Dubliners*. The epistolary form was traditionally viewed as a literary technique for using writing to represent the human consciousness, and in his early fiction, *Dubliners* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce attempts to represent a single character's consciousness as directly as possible to his readers without making unnecessary changes to the text. His first attempt is in his collection of short stories, *Dubliners*, which he worked on from 1904-1907, but which was not published collectively until 1914 because of objections from several publishers. In the first story, "The Sisters," the anonymous narrator meditates on the word "paralysis," which is the one of the recurrent themes of the collection. As Joyce wrote to his friend C.P. Curran, "I call the series *Dubliners* to betray the soul of that hemiplegia or paralysis which many consider a city". Joyce uses focalization and free indirect discourse to represent the consciousness of his characters in *Dubliners*, and each story is a brief psychological portrait of a character during a critical moment in his or her life, when he or she struggles

against, and ultimately succumbs to, the paralyzing forces of family, religion, and politics.

Many of the stories in *Dubliners* are told by a heterodiegetic narrator, and those

that are usually focalized through a single main character, which limits the external readers' view of the storyworld to what the main character sees.<sup>2</sup> Joyce also uses free indirect thought to paint psychological portraits of his characters in specific moments in their lives, but without superfluous punctuation and language, such as quotation marks and phrases like "he thought," without introducing other forms in the text, such as a letter or a diary, and without an unnecessary narratee. The modernist authors use focalization and free indirect thought not only to present the subjectivity of a main character, called a center of consciousness, but to present the subjectivity of other characters, producing a narrative told from multiple perspectives. Joyce, on the other hand, often confines the perspective and thought reporting in *Dubliners* to just one character, a decision that creates strong parallels between Joyce's short stories and the character element of the epistolary tradition.

Examining the story "Eveline" demonstrates how both focalization and free indirect thought allow Joyce to represent the subjective experiences of a single character. The opening of the story shows how an omniscient heterodiegetic narrator, a heterodiegetic

narrator focalizing through a character, and free indirect thought work side by side to represent a character's consciousness:

She sat at the window watching the evening invade the avenue. Her head was leaned against the window curtains, and in her nostrils was the odour of dusty cretonne. She was tired. Few people passed. The man out of the last house passed on his way home; she heard his footsteps clacking along the concrete pavement and afterwards crunching on the cinder path before the new red houses. One time there used to be a field there in which they used to play every evening with other people's children. Then a man from Belfast bought the field and built houses in it — not like their little brown houses, but bright brick houses with shining roofs.

The first two sentences are a distant view of Eveline, describing her looking out

the window. The language of these sentences, with their metaphorical description of

twilight and the acute attention given to what Eveline smells, indicates that the voice

speaking is probably not Eveline's voice, because in the text she is depicted as a lower class woman who works in a shop. The next sentence, which describes how Eveline feels, is more simplistic and sounds more like the language she might use: "She was tired." The

sentences, “Few people passed. The man out of the last house passed on his way home” are examples of the narrator focalizing through Eveline; he describes what she sees out the window. But again, when the narrator begins to discuss Eveline’s memories, “One time there used to be a field there in which they used to play every evening with other people’s children,” the words in the description sound like ones Eveline would choose if she were talking. The narrator’s distinctive voice introduces the story, but readers are slowly drawn into Eveline’s character as their vision of the storyworld is soon limited by her sight and as they are exposed to a voice that sounds like her own when the narrator talks about her feelings or her memories. The use of free indirect thought in this story allows Eveline’s own voice to come out in the text, even though nothing that she says is directly quoted. The “free” quality of free indirect thought also allows Joyce to move seamlessly between the different narrative techniques he employs without punctuation marks, phrases, a change of form, or a narratee. Joyce’s decision to focalize through Eveline and to only report on her thoughts demonstrates how language can represent a character’s subjectivity, which was the function of the letter in eighteenth-century fiction, laying the foundation for the character element of the epistolary tradition.

In *Dubliners*, Joyce works on refining his ability to represent human consciousness to his external readers

and does not really experiment with the epistolary form. There are only three stories where letters appear in *Dubliners*: “Eveline,” “Counterparts,” and “The Dead.” In “The Dead” there is a sentence quoted from a letter that Gabriel wrote when he was first in love with his wife Gretta that is used to reveal Gabriel’s past internal state to readers of the story.<sup>3</sup> As Gretta and Gabriel Conroy return this is why he could remember something specific he had said to Gretta—because it was written down in a letter. The sentence following the letter also calls attention to the physical words on the page: “Like distant music these words that he had written years before were borne towards him from the past”. In a moment of synesthesia, the words on the page are transformed into an audible sound, moving through time, connecting him to the past and forming a bridge to future thoughts as he imagines himself and Gretta alone in their hotel room about to make love. This one-sentenced quotation from a letter specifically references Joyce’s own correspondence. In his biography of Joyce, Richard Ellmann points out the similarities between this quotation from Gabriel’s letter to Gretta and a couple of sentences Joyce wrote to his wife Nora in one of his letters to her when they were first dating. Joyce wrote to Nora: “And yet why should I be ashamed of words? Why should I not call you what in my heart I continually call you? What is it that prevents me unless it be that no word is tender enough to be your name”. This sentence suggests that as a writer Joyce has a preference for the epistolary



form. An avid letter writer, Joyce with this one sentence draws a connection between his own personal writing and his art, a move that will be repeated in *Ulysses* and in *Finnegans Wake*.

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. In his first novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce continued his experiments in representing a single character's consciousness using internal focalization and free indirect thought. However, instead of just focusing on the psychological state of a character in a single moment of time, Joyce is striving to show a person's development over time and the events that led to the formation of his personality. All the events in *A Portrait* are shown through the main character Stephen Dedalus' eyes, and the majority of the language used in the text matches the language Stephen would use at certain stages of development in his life.<sup>4</sup> An incident between Stephen and one of his schoolfellows illustrates how Joyce continued to use both focalization and free indirect thought in *A Portrait*:

They all laughed again. Stephen tried to laugh with them. He felt his whole body hot and confused in a moment. What was the right answer to the question? He had given two and still Wells laughed. But Wells must know the right answer for he was in third of grammar. He tried to think of Wells's mother but he did not dare to raise his eyes to Wells's face. He did not like Wells's face. It was Wells who had shouldered him into

the square ditch the day before because he would not swop his little snuff box for Wells's seasoned hacking chestnut, the conqueror of forty. It was a mean thing to do; all the fellows said it was. And how cold and slimy the water had been! And a fellow had once seen a big rat jump plop into the scum. In Book 1, Stephen is about seven to nine years old, and his language, though descriptive, is the language of a younger child. His inability to completely understand Wells' joke demonstrates that this incident is told from his perspective. Joyce continues to use these techniques of representing consciousness throughout the novel, until Stephen decides to leave Ireland and go to Europe. At this point the discourse of the narrative changes to a journal, and the novel ends with Stephen's attempt to represent his own subjective experience in writing.

In his biography of James Joyce, Richard Ellmann writes that, "Joyce's first interior monologue was inserted at the end of *A Portrait*," but his description of the language of the journal is not completely accurate. H. Porter Abbott defines interior monologue as "The thinking and feeling of a character conveyed without the usual grammatical signs of narration medication (e.g. quotation marks or the phrases 'he said, she said')," so the diary entry format which frames the language at the end of *A Portrait* prevents it from being true interior monologue. The journal did allow Joyce to directly present character thoughts to the reader,

unlike free indirect thought, which, as its names implies, only allows for an indirect presentation of thought through the heterodiegetic narrator. Ellmann comments on some of the positive benefits of the form: “[The journal] had a dramatic justification there in that Stephen could no longer communicate with anyone in Ireland but himself. But it had a way of relaxing by sentence fragments and seeming casual connections among thoughts the more formal style of most of the narratives”. On the other hand, the journal format required an awkward switch to a new genre that hadn’t been present in the novel previously; nothing else in the text indicates that Stephen has been recording his thoughts in a journal or a diary. Inspired by other writers such as Edouard Dujardin, George Moore, Tolstoy, and Freud, in his next work, Joyce would begin to use interior monologue to directly present character thoughts to the reader without any accoutrements or forced forms. “Having gone so far, Joyce in *Ulysses* boldly eliminated the journal, and let thoughts hop, step, jump, and glide without the selfconsciousness of a journal to account for their agitation”. There is one letter in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which is in Book I. It is a letter that Stephen imagines himself writing to his mother to tell her that he is sick.

Dear Mother,

I am sick. I want to go home. Please come and take me home. I am in the infirmary.

Your fond son, Stephen.

The language of his letter clearly represents Stephen’s thoughts. With its short sentences, repetitive style, and simple words, this letter contains the language of a young child, and because it mirrors the language in the text, continues to add to the portrayal of Stephen’s character in this section of the novel as a very young and innocent boy. What is interesting about the letter, however, is that it is completely invented. Stephen does not write it down; it is his idea of the type of message he would send to his parents to let them know he is sick. So although use of the letter in fiction was rooted in its mimetic form and its ability to represent reality, in *A Portrait*, the letter becomes a fantasy and a product of the imagination. This short note shows that despite his focus using different narrative techniques for representing human consciousness, Joyce still sees the letter as a necessary part of his fiction. In this example, he is still using the letter to show that language can reveal a subjective experience, but the imaginary nature of the letter shows that he is also starting to see the potential of the letter as a form he can experiment with.

*Ulysses*. *Ulysses*, published in 1922, retells the story of Homer’s *Odyssey* in an early twentieth-century setting. One of the reasons *Ulysses* is an important development in the history of the novel is that it was the first consistent integration of new literary techniques, specifically interior monologue, and a

related technique, stream of consciousness, into traditional fictional forms. Joyce did not make his mark on literary history by inventing either technique; he maintained that he discovered stream of consciousness in the French novel *Les lauriers sont coupés* written by Edouard Dujardin in 1888. What Joyce did do in *Ulysses* is effectively combine interior monologue with other forms of narration in the novel and refine the use of stream of consciousness technique in particular. As David Hayman notes of Joyce's use of stream of consciousness in *Ulysses*: *The Mechanics of Meaning*, "He used the technique as he did many others to do specific jobs, and principally, to bring into unusually sharp focus the alert conscious minds of individuals whose character he wished to define quickly, completely, and unmistakably before dissolving individuality and disclosing the basis of character in hidden impulses". The use of both interior monologue and stream of consciousness "... allows us a glimpse of the nature and the workings of the human mind in general".

With the word "Chrysostomos," which Stephen thinks as he looks at Buck Mulligan's golden toothed mouth in "Telemachus," Joyce had completed his aesthetic project of attempting to present a single character's consciousness to the reader without any auxiliary forms or switches in genre. Interior monologue and stream of consciousness allowed him to present one character's thoughts directly to the reader. With the

use of these new techniques, the included letter became an outdated form for representing the psychological states of characters. But Joyce decided not to abandon the letter and, like other modernist writers, used the epistolary form in literature in new ways. He saw the letter as a place where he could continue his experiments with representing subjectivity through written language; thus Joyce built on the character element of the epistolary tradition, but took it in a new direction. Instead of showing that written language could clearly represent experience, he uses the letter to experiment with the ways language cannot clearly represent experience—the ways in which language fails to capture human thought.

One of the facets of letters that Joyce explored was how to represent the mental

processes involved in everyday activities like reading and writing. An example of this is in the "Nestor" chapter. Stephen finishes teaching his class and then has a discussion with his employer Mr. Deasy, who is attempting to be his mentor. Mr. Deasy asks Stephen to read a letter he has written about foot and mouth disease before he submits it to the newspaper. The text of Mr. Deasy's letter is not directly reproduced within *Ulysses*; external readers of the text only have access to it through Stephen's thoughts. Here is an excerpt of what the reader sees:

May I trespass on your valuable space. That doctrine of laissez faire which so often in our history. Our cattle trade. The way of all our old industries. Liverpool ring which jockeyed the Galway harbour scheme. European conflagration. Grain supplies through the narrow waters of the channel. The pluperfect imperturbability of the department of agriculture. Pardoned a classical allusion. Cassandra. By a woman who was no better than she should be. To come to the point at issue.

Mr. Deasy's letter is not a complete included letter, because the full text is not presented, and readers only see the letter through the lens of Stephen's mind. As his eyes glance over the page, Stephen does not think every word that is written; he shortens sentences, pays attention to keywords, and picks up on errors. Stephen "skims" or only quickly reads his employer's missive. Since there are so many obvious gaps in what was written, the emphasis here is not on the letter itself, but on trying to show how Stephen's mind works when he reads.

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