

New Dimensions in a Classic Novel: James Joyce

Literature, Comparative Literature

Introduction, interview, excerpt, lesson plan

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Figure 1. Illustration commissioned by JES copyright @ 2011 Margaret Hurst

Editor's Introduction

James Joyce is a fascinating writer, but he can be a most difficult author to teach. In her dissertation, Lynn Bongiovanni brings a recent viewpoint – empire theory – to bear on this most singular author and finds an interesting paradox. While Joyce inveighed against imperial rule – in this case, Ireland's "colonization" by the British – he was capable of celebrating the fruits of empire in his writings. Just as you and I may deplore the consequences of what might be called the modern technology "empire," even as we happily use our refrigerators and computers, Joyce had his own conflicted attitude towards empire.

In this brief excerpt from Prof. Bongiovanni's full dissertation, and in her interview, the author begins to set out the structure and overview of Joyce's conflicted politics. In the later parts of her dissertation, she goes into detail, using specific passages from Joyce's prose to illustrate her thesis.

James Joyce and the Consumption of Empire

by Lynne Bongiovanni

Interview with Lynn Bongiovanni (July 2011)

An author as rich as Joyce is seen in a different light by each new generation. What new do you see in him?

Joyce famously promised that he would keep scholars busy for centuries, so it is not surprising that readers are always discovering new and exciting aspects of his work. A large part of Joyce scholarship of the past few decades has focused on Joyce as a political writer, which is important, but I think that most readers of Joyce understand the dangers of labeling him in a particular way. His work is so multi-faceted and complex that it becomes impossible to reduce to any particular school or movement. How we read Joyce at any given time probably reveals more about us than about Joyce himself. I'm not quite sure what the next step in Joyce scholarship will be, but I'm sure that it will be exciting both in terms of finding new ways of reading Joyce and uncovering what this new approach reveals about changing trends in scholarship.

You mention two schools of thought (among others) regarding James Joyce. The first that he is a postcolonial writer—specifically an Irish writer reacting to Britain's domination of Ireland, a “defining voice of Irish independence.” The second is that he is a universal writer, reacting to the modern age. How do you see him?

As a developing artist, Joyce walked a tightrope between his own keen interest in Irish politics—he was nine years old when he wrote a poem detailing what he saw as the unforgivable betrayal of Charles Stewart Parnell—and his desire to become a respected “European” author, free from the nationalism and cultural specificity that was disdained by the ideals of High Modernism. Joyce refused to make any overtly political public statements, but this reveals less about his own private political positions than his strong desire to present himself in the role of international exile. After Dominic Manganiello's *Joyce's Politics* (1980), it became impossible to read Joyce as an apolitical figure, and scholars began examining how Joyce's Irishness, and his feelings about Ireland's political situation, shaped him and his art.

Was Joyce the product of a particular time and place, or was he unique—a talent who could have emerged in any era? How might he have written if he had been born fifty years earlier, of fifty years later?

Like all of us, Joyce was absolutely a product of his time. I think that his basic concerns—the individual's struggles against social pressure, the celebration of quotidian experience—speak to artists of any era, but his work is greatly influenced by the particular time and geography of his birth. It is important to remember that Joyce was born not even fifty years after the worst

years of the Great Hunger, and at a time of great political upheaval and uncertainty in Ireland. He was acquainted with such diverse figures in the Irish independence movement as William Butler Yeats and Arthur Griffith. His artistic concerns would have been completely different had he been born fifty years earlier or later.

What are your favorite examples of imperial imagery in Joyce's writings?

I always come back to the figure of Old Gummy Granny in the Circe episode of *Ulysses*; she wears a "sugarloaf hat" and bears "the deathflower of the potato blight on her breast." This image suggests Joyce's awareness of the tragic consequences of Ireland's consumption of goods harvested in the colonies of the New World: the country's overreliance on the potato contributed to the Great Famine, and its appetite for sugar works to support the very imperial system that oppresses it.

Did images of empire find their way into Joyce's contemporaries? How did those differ from the images in Joyce's writing?

Joyce's Irish contemporaries—I'm thinking especially of Bram Stoker and Oscar Wilde—certainly considered issues of empire, but in strikingly different ways. Stoker's *Dracula* can certainly be read politically, as the Count's journey to London uncovers deeply rooted English anxieties about the consequences of immigration from the outer edges of the Empire, and Wilde's lush descriptions of oriental décor in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* speak in part to the author's aesthetic theories. But Joyce's work seems somewhat unique in its attention to the almost symbiotic relationship between Ireland and England, a complex interdependence that complicates for Joyce the question of Irish nationalism and independence.

Two of his contemporaries, Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw, see British society through an upper-class lens. How large a factor is Joyce's working-class perspective in the enduring popularity of his work?

Whenever people who are intimidated by the idea of reading Joyce ask me where they should begin, I send them to *Dubliners*, exactly because of the ways that Joyce's exploration of the city's working classes makes the collection so accessible to general readers. I also find it interesting, though, that Joyce makes clear in "The Dead" that the social paralysis he depicts in *Dubliners* is not limited to the working classes, but extends to all aspects of Dublin society.

In which 20th century artists do you see the influence of Joyce?

I laughed when I read an interview with Frank McCourt in which he said that he could not make a career of writing until he stopped trying to imitate James Joyce. Joyce still casts a long shadow, especially for Irish writers. That said, I think that Joyce would have loved the portrayal of Irish childhood in *Angela's Ashes* as well as in Roddy Doyle's *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha*

Ha. Were he alive today, I think he would appreciate contemporary Irish writers like Colm Toibin and Colum McCann, who explore Irish identity in a global context. I believe that Joyce also would have enjoyed Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, which pays tribute to Joyce's *Ulysses* as it chronicles a day in the life of one person.

It certainly seems like a powerful parallel to today when you write about Joyce's characters who protest the English occupation yet "turn a blind eye to the fact that their own consumption of British imperial goods increases the exploitation of other colonies." Do you see similar imagery in today's literature?

This examination of the complex relationship between Ireland and Empire still resonates in contemporary literature. When I read Sebastian Barry's *A Long Long Way* (2005), which looks at the experience of an Irish soldier serving in the British Army during World War I, it occurred to me that Barry asks some of the same questions Joyce does in *Ulysses* when he examines the role of Irish soldiers in the Boer War.

You write about the images of high empire, specifically the Crystal Palace and the Great Exhibit of 1851, and how they created a "promise of abundance" which offsets the negative impact of imperial society. Are there similar images in today's stories? Where do we see them?

There is a striking scene in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* in which a character who grew up in Africa visits an American supermarket for the first time and faints at the sight of the multitude of goods on the shelves. Joyce plays with this same idea in *Ulysses*, particularly in his description of the "superabundance" of the Dublin market that appears in the Cyclops episode. Both Joyce and Kingsolver seem to be interrogating the ways that political systems use propaganda to create a connection between surplus and power.

What do you mean by Joyce's "Oriental" views?

Joyce's work is filled with visions of the East, which we are compelled to read today through the lens of what Edward Said describes in *Orientalism*. But I am not convinced that Joyce's attention to European dreams of the exotic and voluptuous Orient is merely an appropriation of Eastern culture; I also see how Joyce uses these stereotypical images and fantasies of the Orient to highlight the ways that Dubliners like Stephen Dedalus, who dreams of flying away on a magic carpet, indulge in Orientalist fantasies as a means of escaping, if only in their imagination, from the oppressive control of church and state.

Joyce opened one of the first movie theatres in Ireland. What did he like about movies? What would he think of movies today?

I really cannot imagine Joyce lining up at the cineplex on a Saturday night to see the latest Hollywood blockbuster, but he was indeed very interested in film, mostly because of its potential to capture the experience of consciousness in ways that the written word

cannot. Joyce strove to capture the reality of experience and our inner lives, but because thoughts resemble images more than words, he felt constrained even by his stream-of-consciousness technique. I think that Joyce would have been especially fascinated by montage, and I always think of him when I see the christening scene in “The Godfather,” where Coppola is able to present a number of events occurring simultaneously, a feat that Joyce attempts in the Wandering Rocks episode of *Ulysses*.

Excerpt from Bongiovanni’s *James Joyce and the Consumption of Empire* can be found [here](#), and abstract and full text acquired [here](#).

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Lynne Bongiovanni earned her Ph.D. from Fordham University and currently teaches as the Dean of the Undergraduate College and Associate Professor of English at the College of Mount Saint Vincent. She is a member of the International James Joyce Foundation. Among her recent publications is “‘Turbaned Faces Going By’: James Joyce and Irish Orientalism,” in Ariel: A Review of International English Literature (October, 2007).

Postsecondary Lesson Plan to Accompany “James Joyce and the Consumption of Empire”

By Tom Durwood

1. What is the author’s thesis?

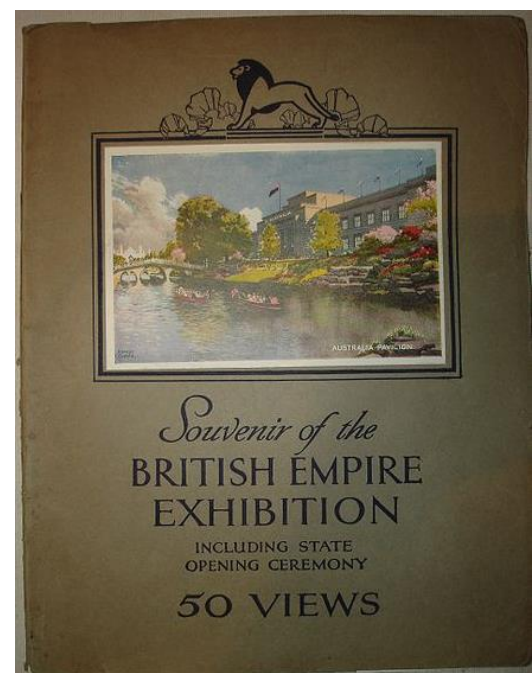


Figure 2. Souvenir booklet from the 1924 British Empire Exhibition. Photo David Rimes.

2. Who was James Joyce? Where and when did he live? Is that important to understanding his fiction?

3. Joyce is somewhat famous for using a stream of consciousness writing technique. It can be difficult to understand. Here is an example:

Stephen, an elbow rested on the jagged granite, leaned his palm against his brow and gazed at the fraying edge of his shiny black coat-sleeve. Pain, that was not yet the pain of love, fretted his heart. Silently, in a dream she had come to him after her death, her wasted body within its loose brown grave-clothes giving off an odour of wax and rosewood, her breath, that had bent upon him, mute, reproachful, a faint odour of wetted ashes. Across the threadbare cuffedge he saw the sea hailed as a great sweet mother by the well-fed voice beside him.

Please use this same weird style to describe your morning (you are the protagonist, not Stephen).

4. According to the author, what did James Joyce think of the British? How do we know what he thought?

5. According to Lynne Bongiovanni, Joyce displays a split or conflicted attitude towards the British Empire and its benefits. What is that conflict?

6. How did James Joyce earn a living in real life? Did elements of his working life find their way into his fiction?

7. George Orwell is another writer who, like Joyce, has deep suspicions about the British empire. Please read his essay "Shooting an Elephant" (<http://www.online-literature.com/orwell/887/>) and compare his writing to James Joyce's. How are their writing styles different? Which one hates the British more? Which will you remember a year from now?

8. The Modern Library recently voted James Joyce's *Ulysses* as #1 on a list of the 100 Best Novels of the last century. Do you agree? What would your #1 novel be? Why?

9. *The Lord of the Rings* is on that list, but *Harry Potter* is not. Agree or disagree? Why?
