

Joyce: A Quintessential Artist of 20th Century High Modernism – Richard Ellmann and Denis Donoghue – A Review

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Abstract

James Joyce, in 1940, when asked to explain what *Ulysses* was about, he proudly commented - "I have put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it (sic) will keep professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant, and that's the only way of ensuring one's immortality." Critics and criticisms on Joyce are immense from the beginning to till date. The works of Joyce, like Shakespeare's, provided great amount of material for the critics to study, investigate, interpret and evaluate their essence. These perceptions of critics, at times, appeared to have outnumbered the actual works by Joyce. These criticisms meticulously assessed the writer both in positive and negative aspects. In this light, for review and analysis, here I have taken two critical works that consider Joyce as a quintessential artist of the 20th century high modernism.

Keywords: James Joyce, Criticism on Joyce, Richard Ellmann, Artist, Modernism,

Introduction

James Joyce, in 1940, when asked to explain what *Ulysses* was about, he proudly commented - "I have put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant, and that's the only way of ensuring one's immortality." Critics and criticism on Joyce are immense from the beginning to till date. The major critics, at the outset, are Frank Budgen (*James Joyce and the Making of Ulysses*, 1934), Stuart Gilbert (*James Joyce's Ulysses: A Study*, 1930), Richard Ellmann (*James Joyce*, 1959), Hugh Kenner, Wyndham Lewis, William York Tindall, Edmund Wilson, Ezra Pound and many others. These critics apart, the list even encompasses a few notable intellectuals like T.S. Eliot, Carl Jung, Jacques Derrida. The works of Joyce, like Shakespeare's, provided great amount of material for the critics to study, investigate, interpret and evaluate its essence. These perceptions of critics, at times, appeared to have outnumbered the actual works by Joyce.

These criticisms meticulously assessed the writer both in positive and negative aspects; Initially, Richard Aldington's essay *The Influence of James Joyce* was a notable one in the genre of anti-criticism against Joyce. He accused *Ulysses* to be poor in style and technical experiments. These elements of Joyce, according to the critic, eventually resulted in chaos and the subject matter appeared very unsound and repulsive. Many other critics like T. S. Eliot, on the other side, backed the author with their formidable viewpoints. Eliot's famous 1923 *Dial* article *Ulysses, Order and Myth* defended Joyce strongly; in a direct reply to Aldington, Eliot, on *Ulysses*'s mythical comparison, wrote – it is a means "of controlling, of ordering, or giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history." This technique, according to Eliot, is "a step toward making the modern world possible for art, toward that order and form which Mr. Aldington so earnestly desires." Similar attacks and appraisals on the form and content of Joyce's creations continued to emerge throughout the century. In this light, for review and analysis, here I have taken two critical works that consider Joyce as a quintessential artist of the 20th century high modernism: Richard Ellmann's 1987 essay *James Joyce In and Out of Art* and Denis Donoghue's 1985 essay *The Fiction of James Joyce*.

James Joyce In and Out of Art by Richard Ellmann

Personal implications

Ellmann commences his essay with a hint on the importance of Bloomsday (June 16, 1904 – the day on which *Ulysses* is set) corresponding it with all levels: Joyce thought about its significance and scribbled it in a notebook in 1924: "Today 16 of June 20 after. Will anybody remember this date?" The essayist identifies this reflection of Joyce's thought in *Ulysses* when Stephen Dedalus prepares lines for a new poem questioning its endurance, i.e., he wants his epiphanies to be placed among the great works found in all the major libraries of the world, even in the centuries-long burnt Alexandrian Library. Here, the critic pours in an autobiographical element mentioning the instruction given by Joyce to his brother Stanislaus Joyce, i.e., to wipe out his poems before he sets off to Europe. Ellmann also brings in a similar incident in Joyce's life when he was neglected by an American businessman who promised him a huge sum to start up a new magazine. Joyce, out of excitement, says to his friend: "I think I am coming into my kingdom." The same expression is found repeated in his letter to his wife. Joyce promises Nora that one day she would reign his mind when he becomes the ruler of his kingdom.

Nationalist beliefs and erudition

The writer predominantly quotes Joyce for setting a precedent for modern writing. It is Joyce who influenced the next day writers to break away from the complexities of conventional story telling. Ellmann also parallels Joyce with certain modern writers who fervently enjoyed fandom as a result of their inestimable scholarship. The writer quotes that Joyce's depiction of the city pushed his readers to fanatically follow the

descriptions to live in the city and feel its actuality. The essay also talks of Joyce's Irishness that is abundantly embedded in his writings. It views Joyce as an ardent follower of Irish nationalism, a necessary reformer and a custodian who recognizes the true national heroes and the identity of the flavor of their soil. A brief account of the people with whom Joyce was close and the burning time that Joyce had in publishing his works also find their place here. The essay also advocates the statement that the psychic voyage that Joyce took after exhausting his unique themes in each work, scripts the growth of the mind. The essayist explains the condition of the mind of the writer while writing his *tour de force* *Ulysses*- he (Joyce) intentionally dispensed enormous complexities in the work so as to match with or to surpass the magnitude of other great writers. Apart from these, million questions like why did Joyce prefer Dedalus to Dely? His early inspiration of Norwegian writer Henrik Ibsen, the intricacies of *Finnegans Wake* are sensibly provided with answers.

The Fiction of James Joyce by Denis Donoghue

Prose and diction

As the title suggests, this essay speaks of the eminent prose quality of Joyce. Donoghue elaborately lauds Stephen's (Joyce's) distinct skill of using allusions. To elucidate this, he begins with the note on the inclusion of phrases used in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* from a small work published in the late nineteenth century. He (the essayist) chiefly talks about the legitimate and logical way of using the phrase, words and their associated and dissociated meanings, and the inner world of individual emotions are mirrored perfectly in a lucid and supple periodic prose. The writer distinguishes the genuine artistic qualities of Joyce from Yeats; "Stephen is urging himself to move beyond the rich adhering words of poetic diction-to escape from his lyric prison, to a life of decision and action, much as Yeats had to put behind him the entrancing associations that hang near words before he could write the far more resilient poems of his middle books." The critic also does not fail to discover Joyce's idiosyncratic feature of diction. He does it so painlessly by equating him with the European writers like Gerhart Hauptmann, Newman, Ibsen and Ben Jonson. Denis reminds the readers about the European origins of Joyce's diction in *Dubliners*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* portraying the linkage of his employment of language with that of Wittgenstein's saying - the world is "everything that is the case." According to Denis, the artist was able to make language "offer itself as a counter truth to the truth of reality" producing a type of world of imagination and desire all at once that his exact skill with a sentence is able to "disclose a reality not itself linguistic."

The 'two worlds' notion

The existence of two worlds for Joyce and his major characters is evidently put forth in the observations of the writer. Denis further explores the inner stream of the mind of the author who could possibly imagine, live and echo their minds in writing. The article also mentions the miscellaneous linguistic affiliations and the use of a dozen languages in *Finnegans Wake*. The silent power of words with reference to his works, in particular, *Finnegans Wake* is audibly highlighted in the essay. Furthermore, it reveals Joyce's treatment of Yeats as his fated precursor and his resolution to choose Europe as his destiny.

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