
UNIT 1 CONTEXTS

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

Our primary objective in this unit is to touch upon the 'contexts' that affected the making of Joyce as a writer and the writing of *A Portrait*. Joyce's life and the literary context of *A Portrait* are also looked at here.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Joyce was an Irish 'modernist' writer with a largely Europeanized sensibility. He wrote in English and the 'tradition' that affected his 'individual talent' is as much English as it is European. His concern with language – its limitations as well as its potential – is a notable feature of his work. This concern and his being a city-writer (Dublin in this case) stamp him as a modernist. Your awareness of the poetry of another high priest of English-language Modernism T.S. Eliot should help you to appreciate Joyce's modernist sensibility.

Joyce's own life had a direct bearing on *A Portrait*. This is especially the case with how he reacted to Ireland and to Ireland's treatment of Parnell. In this context, you should remember that Joyce's attitude to nationalism and to the Irish Catholic hierarchy were both substantially affected by this awareness. Another thing that needs to be kept in mind is that developments in poetry and fiction worked in such close tandem at the beginning of this century that overlap, when talking of influence, is quite inevitable.

1.2 IRELAND AND PARNELL

Ireland, as you are probably aware, is a predominantly Catholic country. Charles Steward Parnell was a Protestant and yet his personal charisma made him the leading spokesman for the Irish Nationalist cause in the British Parliament. Another important public figure was Michael Davitt, a leader of the Irish Land League. What led to Parnell's downfall was a divorce case filed by Captain O'Shea, a member of Parnell's party, who accused Parnell of having had a clandestine affair with his wife Kitty O'Shea. In this period of crisis, the then English Prime Minister Gladstone and the leaders of the Catholic Church in Ireland both dissociated themselves from Parnell. As you read the opening section of the novel you would appreciate how this 'betrayal' of Parnell (and figures like Davitt) was a part of the Irish psyche of those times. That this betrayal stayed imprinted in Joyce's (and Stephen's) mind becomes obvious in the closing sections of *A Portrait*.

Joyce had a firm belief that political subjection had led the Irish people to have a slavish mentality. What Ireland needed was an expansion of consciousness. Around that time there were strong revivalist tendencies manifesting themselves in Ireland. Joyce had an attitude of deep distrust towards such tendencies. For example, the general enthusiasm generated by the founding of the Irish National Theatre Society in 1901 and the coming into existence of the Abbey Theatre Company was not shared by Joyce.

Parnell and the Irish situation in general have a direct bearing on the Christmas dinner scene in *A Portrait* and on the exchanges between students in the closing stages of the novel where Stephen says to Davin with odd violence:

Do you know what Ireland is? ...Ireland is the old sow that eats her farrow.
(p.220)

1.3 JOYCE'S LIFE

On account of the autobiographical element present in *A Portrait*, a quick look at the salient details of Joyce's life comes to be important. Here, I shall concern myself largely with those details that find an echo in the novel.

The first of ten children of John Stanislaus Joyce and Mary Murray Joyce, James Joyce was born in Dublin on 2 February 1882. The Joyce family's frequent changes of residence is an important aspect of Joyce's life that has a bearing on the novel. When Joyce was four, the family moved to Cork and stayed there till 1892. For about a year after that they lived in Blackrock. The family was often on the move within Dublin (they moved house at least a dozen times in Joyce's early years). Between 1888 and 1902 Joyce's education was first at Clongowes Wood College (early schooling), Belvedere College, Dublin (subsequent schooling) and University College, Dublin (from where he received his B.A. degree in 1902). He then went to Paris to study medicine but that did not work out as they required fees to be paid in advance. The one year Joyce still spent in Paris meant reading in public libraries and living on small remittances from home and occasional fees that he received from reviewing books.

In 1903, Joyce's mother was on her deathbed in Dublin. That made him rush back to Dublin. This stay in Dublin was of a little more than a year. In 1904, Joyce left for Paris in the company of Nora Barnacle (the 'marriage' between the two came to have 'official' status only in 1931 and that too 'for testamentary reasons'). What Joyce found attractive in Nora was a striking combination of innocence and earthiness. In

1905 Joyce moved to Trieste where he taught at the Berlitz School. His son Giorgio was born in 1905. His daughter Lucia was born in 1907. The year 1906 saw Joyce doing a short stint as a foreign correspondent in a bank in Rome and later visiting Ireland where he stayed on till 1910.

The war made the Joyce family move to neutral Zurich (in 1915). The only other place where Joyce had a longish stay (apart from Zurich and Trieste) was Paris where Joyce had moved on Ezra Pound's advice around the time of the publication of *Ulysses*. The outbreak of the Second World War brought him back to Zurich in 1940 where he died and where he was buried.

As regards the publication of Joyce's works of fiction, *Dubliners* (a collection of stories) was published in 1914, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in 1916, *Ulysses* in 1922 and *Finnegans Wake* (taking about 16 years to complete and interestingly called *Work in Progress* during this period) in 1939.

Knowing salient details of Joyce's life will help you with the novel because the autobiographical element has a strong presence in it. The novel's status as "aesthetic autobiography" is taken up in Unit 2 while considering the question of its 'genre'. Here it will suffice if you remember that the aspects of Joyce's life that find more or less a direct echo in the novel are: the large size of Joyce's family (his brothers and sisters) the family's poverty and its frequent changes of house. Joyce's love of city life and his Europeanized outlook; his distrust of violent politics, his flair for languages; and his general unease with institutions of various kinds.

1.4 THE EUROPEAN LITERARY CONTEXT

As I stated in the 'introduction' to this unit, Joyce's was a largely Europeanized sensibility that felt much more at home with cosmopolitanism than with provincialisms of various kinds. This gave him an affinity with T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound (all three can be seen as among the leading 'Makers of the New' in English around 1914). Joyce's reading in European literature was extensive and he came to know some European languages quite well. He admired Ibsen's work and translated Hauptmann. He almost started thinking of himself (at a young age) as being in a line of writing represented by Ibsen and Hauptmann. Another decisive influence on him was Arthur Symons's 1899 book *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. Stephen Mallarme and Charles Baudelaire were two of the leading figures of French Symbolism. Baudelaire gave a new dimension to poetry related to the city and Mallarme's symbolism contained within itself a shift from a Romantic to a modern ironic aesthetic. The Naturalism that Joyce inherited from Ibsen (and Emile Zola) came to be thus tempered by Symbolism. Another important trend of the times was Impressionism and it also influenced Joyce though not as directly as Naturalism and Symbolism did. Impressionism was important to the extent it made language an experiential activity rather than a description of activity. In this respect it paved the way for the 'stream-of-consciousness' technique. A version of this technique was partially used by Joyce in *A Portrait*. *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* were to put this technique to a much more extensive use. This term stream-of-consciousness applies, broadly speaking, to a process, in which, according to the psychological principle of association, a series of thoughts or images, one leading to the next, are joined in what may, in simpler terms, be called a 'train of thought'. With the form of narrative called 'interior monologue' that employs the associative process, the author's intrusion into his narrative gets reduced to a minimum. Virginia Woolf was to later use the 'stream-of-consciousness' technique in novels like *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927).

The mix that Joyce evolved out of his tempering of Naturalism with Symbolism was further affected by his deciding not to step fully out of the broad Realist tradition.

His pursuit of evocation is minus the insubstantiality and softness which sometimes entered the work of Symbolists. The hardness that Joyce's style exhibits most of the time was due to the influence of the French novelist, Gustave Flaubert (1821-80), the famous author of *Madame Bovary* (1857).

1.5 ENGLISH-LANGUAGE MODERNISM

With the English-language Modernism of his times, (represented by Ezra Pound, T.E. Hulme and T.S. Eliot among others) Joyce's relationship was more of a benefactor than a beneficiary. But benefit he did from the general intellectual climate created by Pound, Eliot and the others collectively. This climate encouraged experimentation and the imperative 'Make It New' was very much in the air. Pound's advocacy of first Imagism went a long way in focusing on concretion, immediacy and on toughness of attitude and all this contributed to the 'scrupulous meanness in style' that Joyce cultivated so successfully.

The important thing to keep in mind regarding all the influences that were then in the air is that people as extraordinarily talented as Joyce and Eliot benefited from these influences in a very eclectic (freewheeling) kind of way. There was such a criss-crossing of influences and the desire to do something unusual stylistically was so great and the complexity of experience and of sensations offered by city-life so tremendous that people received 'influences' in ways that were not only direct but also indirect and as often subtle as crude. Monroe K. Spears is a critic who is among the better chroniclers of those exciting times. One of the statements he makes in his 1970 book *Dionysus and the City* has more of a bearing on modernist poetry in general and on Eliot's work in particular but tells us enough about the eclectic way 'influences' worked at that time. I reproduce here a part of that statement to give you an idea of how it was. Spears writes:

The tradition in fiction of which Stendhal was the forerunner and Flaubert the founder, variously described as Symbolist, Naturalist, or more often, Impressionist (the exact, not the soft or blurred kind) reached a kind of fulfillment in James's three great novels just after the turn of the century and in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and *Nostramo*... Eliot like Pound, was imbued in James and Conrad, and we have already seen the powerful influence that Joyce exerted on him after 1914 (p.114).

The point that Spears's statement just quoted makes is that Eliot, Pound and Joyce benefited not from a single influence but a composite of a variety of influences and that Joyce, benefiting from the various artistic and literary tendencies operating at that time then went on to influence Eliot. It also tells us that what affected fiction affected poetry also and vice versa and that most writers of the time (poets and novelists alike) were quite eclectic in their borrowings.

1.6 LET US SUM UP

The various 'contexts' that went into the making of *A Portrait* are:

- i. Joyce's own life
- ii. His admiration for Parnell
- iii. European literary influences
- iv. The intellectual climate associated with English-language Modernism of which Joyce, Eliot and Pound were the leading lights.

1.7 GLOSSARY

French Symbolism/Symbolist Movement:

For most literary historians (and for our present purposes), the term 'Symbolist Movement' refers specifically to a group of French writers – Charles Baudelaire, Stephen Mallarme, Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud and others. Broadly speaking, these poets exploited an order of private symbols in a poetry of rich suggestiveness rather than explicit signification. A major contribution of this group to twentieth century literature was that they brought the Modernist city into focus.

Impressionism:

The Impressionists were a school of painters who wished to depict the fleeting impression from a subjective point of view. Precise representation was not such a great concern with them. The consequence that Impressionism had for fiction-writing was the transfer of interest from external reality to the inner life of the characters.

Naturalism:

In fiction, Naturalism is associated mostly with the work of the French novelist Emile Zola (1840-1902). It was an offshoot of Realism and aimed at offering an even more accurate picture of life than Realism did. The Naturalists believed that the novel should be based on scientific knowledge and the writers themselves should be scientifically objective and exploratory in their approach to work. This also implied that the environment being portrayed should be treated with exactitude.

Stream-of-consciousness:

William James used the phrase in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890) to describe the unbroken flow of perceptions, thoughts and feelings in the waking mind. The term later came to be adopted to describe a distinct narrative method in modern fiction. The novels of Dorothy Richardson, Joyce and Virginia Woolf are often seen as examples of this method. Somewhat influential in bringing about this approach to fiction writing were some of the time-related theories of William James himself and of the French thinker Henri Bergson.

1.8 QUESTIONS

1. What is the relationship between Irish national consciousness and Charles Stewart Parnell?
2. What aspects of French Symbolism and of Naturalism affected Joyce's fictional style?
3. Is there any connection (direct or indirect) between Eliot's poetic practices and Joyce's fiction?

1.9 SUGGESTED READING

Four general books you should read if you want to be familiar with the general climate in which modernism operated are, Malcolm Bradbury (ed.) *Modernism*; Edmund Wilson's *Axel's Castle*; Monroe K. Spears's *Dionysus and the City* and Frank Kermode's *Romantic Image*. Chester Anderson's illustrated book *James Joyce and His World* will give you a good idea of the then Irish situation and of Joyce's life.