



The Modernistic Features in Joyce's *Dubliners*

SHEN Yuan^{[a],*}; DONG Hong^[a]

^[a]School of Foreign Languages, University of Jinan, Jinan, China.
 * Corresponding author.

Supported by Doctoral Fund Project of University of Jinan (B1427);
 Academic Fund Project of School of Foreign Languages, University of
 Jinan (WYKY201406).

Received 29 October 2015; accepted 19 December 2015
 Published online 26 February 2016

Abstract

James Joyce's *Dubliners* is highly modernistic in terms of both content and form. This paper attempts to make an exploration of its modernistic themes of paralysis, loneliness, and death felt by Dubliners at the turn of a century due to religious and political plights, and to analyze Joyce's modernistic writing techniques of epiphany, symbolism, dilution of plots, and shift of narrative perspectives, through which the characters' spiritual subtleties and social complexities are revealed. It aims to show that these modernistic writing techniques highlight the characters' confusion, depression, and resignation in modern Dublin, and Joyce thus presents a chaotic social panorama of Ireland.

Key words: James Joyce; *Dubliners*; Modernistic features

Shen, Y., & Dong, H. (2016). The Modernistic Features in Joyce's *Dubliners*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 12(2), 28-32. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/8173>
 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/8173>

INTRODUCTION

James Joyce (1882-1941) is known as one of the most prominent modernistic novelist in the literary arena, and he is called forefather of stream-of-consciousness novels. During his lifetime, he wrote many significant works, including one collection of short stories, one drama and

three major novels. Among them, *Dubliners*, published in 1914, was deemed as the debut of his writing career. In the early 20th century, Ireland was oppressed by Roman Catholic religion and colonized by the British Empire, and the Dubliners underwent severe spiritual crises. Joyce thus decided to write *Dubliners*.

Dubliners was written from the year of 1904 to 1907 and was published in 1914. It was the most widely read book of Joyce's writings. There is fifteen short stories in *Dubliners* with the background of Ireland, which described the lives of Dubliners coming from the lower or middle-class families in the early 20th century. It can be mainly divided in accordance with three stages of life—childhood, youth and adulthood. It reflects the subtlest psychological activities of the Dubliners, and reveals their paralyzed spiritual state and apathetic life attitude. *Dubliners* is the starting point of Joyce's exploration on modernism.

The modernistic features of *Dubliners* are revealed in fifteen independent stories by Joyce's wielding of epiphany, symbolism, plus its narrative techniques such as dilution of plots, and shift of perspectives, and these modernistic writing techniques work in concert with the Joyce's deep concern for the modern society, in which isolation and alienation, paralysis and death prevail.

1. MODERNISTIC NOVELS

1.1 The Background of Modernistic Literature's Development

Modernism is not a simple concept confined to literary genre. In a broad sense, it is an umbrella term used to describe any counter-tradition thought or practice in the form of literature: painting, architecture, drama and movie and so on. More specifically, it refers to various creative techniques on writing and a group of literary schools. As early as the middle of the 19th century, there emerged aestheticism and symbolism which is considered the origin of modernism. Late symbolism, expressionism, futurism, surrealism, Dadaism, stream of

consciousness together contributed to the first boom of modernism from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th. After World War II, the rise of existentialism, new novel group, absurd theatre, black humor etc., greatly promoted the growth of modernism. (Huai, 2005, p. 6)

In a specific sense, modernism is a cultural and artistic movement, and the generation of modernistic literature has its particular social background. There emerged with industrialization and urbanization in Western society from the end of the 19th century to the early 20th century, which impacted on people's material and spirit life. Meanwhile, people's traditional values began to shake, and religion gradually lost the core position in the human spiritual world. The world became more complex and strange, which made humans more individualized than ever before, but also made them fail to find their positions in society. This kind of alienation and defamiliarization between man and society is just the general characteristics of social relationship in a modern industrial society. In addition, a series of rapid breakthroughs in the field of technology and science at the end of the 19th century also had far-reaching influence on the emergence and development of modernistic literature. As a result, men's life style and way of thinking quietly changed. According to Bradbury:

Modernistic literature is a modernizing literature of world, and is an international literature of rapid industrial development, advanced technology, increasing urbanization, secularization and diversity of social life...In this world, many traditional and unconstitutional things no longer exist. In the Victorian era, the confidence that is not only in human progress, but in the integrity and visibility of the real world was gone. (Bradbury, 1993, p.39)

Meanwhile, under the new order of economy, people felt less satisfaction and freedom, but more isolation, and people's spiritual world became more empty and panic. In the early 20th century, World War I caused great chaos and crisis, and people became confused and traumatic in psychology and had a deep sense of preposterousness. Social changes gradually found their expression in various modernistic forms.

1.2 Modernistic Novels and Its Features

In the field of fiction, the modernistic tide deviates from the old ideas and principles, exerts an effect on the novelist's creation, and promotes the rising of modernistic fiction. According to Li Weiping:

Modernistic novels refer to unconventional novels which were published in nearly half a century between the end of the 19th century and the early 20th century. Modernistic novels deviate from traditional expression, and seek for new art forms. They embody the new concepts of modernistic novelists, which are not bound by any traditional standard or stereotype, but reflect the modern consciousness and modern experience according to novelists' own unique aesthetic principles. (Li, 2003, p.192)

Most of realistic writers in the 19th century paid more attention to practical problems and contradictions in

society, and they used traditional ethics and aesthetic consciousness to judge value. However, modernistic novelists hold that the values reflected in realism novels conflict with the social reality and human spiritual world, so they pay attention to the inner world of characters and reveal the alienated feeling and morbid psychology of modern people. Modernistic novels mainly focus on a critical and negative spirit, alienation, absurdity, loneliness and fear. These changes in values and philosophy lead to the changes of novel creation in terms of subjects and artistic forms.

Modernistic novels focus on the portrayal of the spiritual world of the characters, and reveal the characters' inner reality. In modernistic fiction, people's spiritual world is prevalent, while the external material world is limited. In terms of form, first of all, modernistic novels are unconventional in structure arrangement. Modern novelists boldly experiment and innovates in the structure of novels. Inspired by modern natural science and modern philosophy, they try to get rid of the constraints of the clock time and physical space. The integrality and unity of the traditional works is no longer underlined, and novelists pursue a new aesthetic effect of literary works. Secondly, modernistic fiction reflects the eccentric inclination of skills. Modern writers use many creative skills, such as internal monologue, free association, impersonal narrative and stream of consciousness, etc.. In addition, modernism novelists also have a unique style in the use of language. In order to truly show the characters' mental activities, modernist novelists attach much importance to the ideographic function and materiality of language itself to construct reality through unusual language style. As a result, there are many discourses without punctuation and no case of letters in modernistic novels, which reflect the doubts about the philosophical basis of realism, and alternatively expand the understanding of what realism means.

2. MODERNISTIC THEMES OF DUBLINERS

2.1 Paralysis

In *Dubliners*, paralysis permeated the social life in Dublin and it became a collective disease which was unable to get rid of. The dark and gloomy environment of Dublin made people suffer from spiritual paralysis. When Dubliners awakened to this fact, they would have the more or less consciousness of escape, but no one in *Dubliners* achieved the ultimate success. Through these failed escapes, Joyce suggested: In Dublin, not only the environment of the whole city, but also the spirit of Dubliners had been completely paralyzed. Paralysis in *Dubliners* was mainly revealed in two aspects: paralysis of Dublin and spiritual paralysis of Dubliners.

Paralysis of Dublin was revealed in many stories in *Dubliners*. In *Dubliners*, the author vividly depicted the depressive environment of Dublin and the smothering atmosphere of it. As in the beginning of "Araby," Joyce wrote:

NORTH RICHMOND STREET being blind, was a quiet street except at the hour when the Christian Brother's School set the boys free. An uninhabited house of two stories 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. (19)

In this sentence, Joyce used the words like "blind," "conscious of decent lives within them," "brown imperturbable faces," etc.. These words not only express that the protagonist could not find the way out of the NORTH RICHMOND STREET, but also suggest that the protagonist was naive and could not recognize himself and the outside world. And through these descriptions, this story shows that yearning for a better love or the pursuit of dreams would be in vain for people in Ireland.

The main paralysis in *Dubliners* was spiritual paralysis of Dubliners. In the beginning of *Dubliners*, the Dubliners' spiritual paralysis was scanned from the child's eyes. In *The Sisters*, the child saw the whole process that the priest made atonement for himself, and he felt the damage caused by religion. The event was perceived from the child's perspective and narrated around before and after the death of the priest. Religion was supposed to bring people faith and complete the human spirit, but it unexpectedly became the source of evil. It depressed human nature and led to the spiritual paralysis and the death of the priest. All of these not only shadow the child's mind with depression and terror, but also let the beginning of the novel pervade the depressing atmosphere. "Eveline" reflected the spiritual paralysis of youth. The protagonist tried to escape the reality of paralysis, but forced by reality, her spirit was hard to escape from the constraint of reality. She finally found that she did not have the courage to start a new life and strive for happiness. Finally she could only return to the origin, and like other Dubliners, lived a numb life. *The Dead* is the last story of *Dubliners*, and it revealed the process of self-understanding and spiritual paralysis of the protagonist, Gabriel. This process showed the helplessness of Dubliners living in the state of spiritual crisis.

2.2 Loneliness

Loneliness is one of themes of modernistic literature. In *Dubliners*, people were dull and depressed, and most of them felt less satisfied and happy but more lonely and isolated. Such as in "A Little Cloud," the protagonist was described as:

He was called Little Chandler because, though he was but slightly under the average stature, he gave one the idea of being a little man. His hands were white and small, his frame was fragile, his voice was quiet and his manners were refined. He

took the greatest care of his fair silken hair and moustache and used perfume discreetly on his handkerchief. The half-moons of his nails were perfect and when he smiled you caught a glimpse of a row of childish white teeth. (57)

In this paragraph, we can find that the little Chandler is an exquisite, self-contained and sensitive person. He was full of passion and always wrote poems or repeated lines to express what he thought. He was talented, but he also felt lonely like a drifting cloud which was over the whole Dublin. He lived under the restraint of family chores and worked in dull routines, so he always felt depressed and frustrated. If he had escaped from the environment he lived, he would have found a spiritual companion in reality rather than be like a lonely cloud.

2.3 Death

Dubliners is considered as a collection of short stories of paralysis and death by many commentators. The first story *The Sisters* showed the spiritual paralysis and death of the priest, Flynn, and the last one *The Dead* described the caducity, moderation and death of people. All of these stories construct boring, depressed and deathly atmospheres, dwell on the meaning of life and death, and build the conscious space of life and death.

The Dead is a good interpretation of the theme of death. *The Dead* ended with a snowing environment in Ireland, aiming to show the silence of all things after being covered by snow in Ireland, and the whole of Ireland was filled with the atmosphere of death. In *The Dead*, the protagonist, Gabriel, lived as a "living dead." After he and his wife recalled the first lover of her, Gabriel got a big shock and realized that he himself was a blind person much given to self-satisfaction and self-deception in the past. Finally, he understood the real meaning of life and death. At the end of this story, it described a scene of snowing:

Snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen 43 and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead. (201)

This short paragraph made the theme of death even more obvious. *The Dead* appears in the terminal description of death and paralysis, and it is natural for people to connect its theme with the theme of the book together.

3. MODERNISTIC WRITING TECHNIQUES

3.1 Epiphany

In terms of manifesting characters' consciousness, Joyce did not use stream-of-consciousness skills in *Dubliners*,

while he used a kind of unique creative technique, epiphany, to show the complex thoughts and feelings of characters, according to Tang Xu:

Epiphany is virtually a Christian holy day on January 6th, in memory of the coming of the three kings from the East to see the baby Christ. Here, an epiphany is the experience of a sudden and striking realization. It is mainly used to describe the breakthrough in scientific, religious or philosophical discoveries. Meanwhile, it can also be applied to any situation in which enlightenment on a problem or situation is realized a new and deeper perspective. Epiphany is generally gained after a series of dramatic psychological struggles and small alterations in awareness accumulate to form a change in nature. (Tang, 2011, p.133)

In actuality, Epiphany is a special kind of mental activity. When readers are in the process of reading, he might be puzzled about the theme or something else. However, due to epiphany, readers suddenly understand the significance of something by someone's inspiration and gain a kind of pleasure. But this does not mean that Epiphany can appear suddenly, and Epiphany cannot be formed without protagonists' painful experience and reflection. Almost all characters in *Dubliners* could gain insights into something in the end, and the existence of epiphany brings the stories to a climax.

In "Araby," the young protagonist was lack of awareness of his social environment, and in order to pursue the beautiful love in his mind, he came to the Araby bazaar with eagerness and excitement. However, the bazaar's situation disappointed the young man. When depressed, the young man heard a dialogue between a young woman and two men, standing in front of a booth:

"O, I never said such a thing!"
"O, but you did!"
"O, but I didn't!"
"Didn't she say that?"
"Yes. I heard her."
"O, there's a... fib!" (24)

This conversation caused a strong reaction in the young protagonist's heart. He felt a great disillusionment in love and a big disappointment in real life, which made the young man aware of his own vanity and stupidity. It is at this moment that he generated "epiphany," and he won self-awareness. Epiphany jerks a character out of his/her fantasy, and shows his/her disillusionment with the modern world, thus this writing technique corresponds to the modernistic theme of these stories.

3.2 Symbolism

Symbolism as a literary skill largely reacts against realism and naturalism, and it attempts to approve the spirituality and imagination, etc.. According to Yuan Xianquan:

Symbolism is a literary technique widely used in the twentieth-century fiction. Symbolism seeks to achieve certain effect by using clustered images and metaphors, suggesting or

symbolizing the basic idea or emotion. In literature, symbolism often refers to a word or a phrase denoting an object or a thing, which has a larger range in explanation than the object or thing itself with political, social, or cultural implications. (Yuan, 1999, p.85)

In *Dubliners*, there are many examples of symbolism in various kinds over the whole collection. For example, there are many symbols used in "Clay." "Clay" is generally known as a type of soil, which will be thick and sticky when it is wet. However, it is always considered as death or the overlay of the dead with earth. In the story, "Clay" is a party game where Maria, the protagonist put her hands in. According to the Bible, human beings were made of earth, so clay is just the beginning of life. In the story, "Clay" symbolizes Maria. Meanwhile, "Clay" is also the symbol of the weakness and frailty of man. Maria had many merits, but she also had frailty: The heroine always thought that she was not ordinary, but she was very snobbish and sensitive to her marriage.

Another example of symbolism can be found in "Araby." In the story, Joyce described the Richmond Street as:

We walked through the falring streets, jostled by drunken men and bargaining women, amid the curses of laborers, the shrill litanies of shopboys who stood on guard by the barrels of pigs' cheeks, the nasal chanting of street singers, who sang a com-all-you about O'Donovan Rossa. (20)

In this noisy street, there were all kinds of people, such as religious bigots, petty vendors, etc.. The street was just the symbol of the whole Ireland. Symbolism in *Dubliners* is evocative of some dark images related to the city and Joyce's negative feelings about the city's gloom, chaos, filthiness, and lifelessness.

3.3 Narrative Strategies

Narrative strategies can not only strengthen the artistic value of the stories, but also amplify the significance of the thesis and make them more vivid. The narrative strategies in *Dubliners* mainly include two kinds: dilution of plots and shift of narrative perspectives.

First narrative technique in *Dubliners* is dilution of plots. In terms of the plots of the stories, especially of the earlier stories, most of them have obvious dramatic characteristics and the plots are always arranged in fixed pattern of the start, conflict, climax and the end. However, in Joyce's creative system of stories, traditional plots have no longer played a role in the structure of the whole works. In *Dubliners*, there are no apparent conflicts, climaxes and endings. As in "Two Gallants," it is just about two protagonists wandering on the street and a date made by one of them. In a traditional sense, it is felt boring and plotless. Though Joyce gave up the traditional sense of plots, he did not give up the internal unity of a text. Faced with the increasingly complex and chaotic social reality, Joyce chose to dilute the orderly unified and traditional story plots to reflect real life.

The second narrative technique in *Dubliners* is shift of narrative perspectives. Generally speaking, a narrative perspective means the perspective from which a story is told. Adopting the perspectives of different characters to narrate stories, narrators can render readers opportunities to observe the same event from different sides and make their own judgments. In the first three stories of *Dubliners*, the author mainly adopted the innocent-eye point of view to narrate. And in many other stories, like "Eveline," "After the race," "Two Gallants," etc., the author uses the third person limited perspective in these stories. It means that the narrator gives up his right to be omniscient, and only narrates through the perspective of one person, that is, the narrator can only penetrate into the inner activities and spiritual world of focal characters. Shift of narrative perspectives successfully breaks the situation where the process of narration is only arranged by omniscient narrators in traditional novels, and they show readers different personalities and attitudes. What's more, they truly and directly display the spiritual world of the characteristics to readers, and thus reveal a social panorama of modern Ireland.

CONCLUSION

Joyce's *Dubliners* is modernistic in both its content and form. The writing techniques in *Dubliners*, such

as epiphany, symbolism, dilation of plots, and shift of perspectives, are much geared to Joyce's literary presentation of *Dubliners*' psychological crisis and Dublin's social chaos. Joyce employed various modernistic techniques to interpret the characters' inner activities and social complexities, and the modernistic themes of paralysis, loneliness, and death reflect *Dubliners*' confusion and depression when faced with religious and political oppression in the end of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century.

REFERENCES

- Bradbury, M. (1993). *The modern British novel*. London & New York: Penguin Books.
- Ellmann, R. (1982). *James Joyce*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Huai, P. X. (2005). *Escape—On the theme of James Joyce's Dubliners* (MA Thesis). Shanghai International Studies University.
- Joyce, J. (2007). *Dubliners*. New York: Signet Classics.
- Tang, X. (2011). James Joyce's spiritual epiphany and aestheticism. *Journal of Hengyang Normal University*, (2), 133-136.
- Yuan, X. Q. (1999). On the symbolistic art of *Dubliners*. *Journal of PLA Foreign Languages University*, (4), 85-87.