

Section 6. Philology and linguistics

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IRISH LITERATURE AND THE WESTERN EUROPEAN TRADITION: A PERSPECTIVE FROM JAMES JOYCE'S "THE DEAD"

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Abstract

Irish literature stands among the oldest literary traditions in Western Europe, alongside Latin and Greek. Its origins trace back to the 4th and 5th centuries, during which the Ogham script a distinctive system of writing was employed from the early medieval period onward. Despite its unique linguistic and national characteristics, Irish literary production has long been intertwined with English language and culture, shaped by the phenomenon of the “dual tradition.” This entanglement often led to the assimilation of Irish authors and their works into the canon of English literature, a process further facilitated by the fact that many prominent Irish writers lived and worked in England as emigrants. Figures such as Edmund Burke, Jonathan Swift, Oliver Goldsmith, Oscar Wilde, and George Bernard Shaw were, until the early 20th century, traditionally regarded as English or British authors. However, following Ireland's partial independence and separation from England between 1920 and 1922, literary scholarship began to reclassify these writers and their works as integral to Irish cultural heritage. This shift is reflected in the emergence of the term “Anglo-Irish” literature, denoting works produced by Irish authors writing in English, often while residing in England.

From the 17th century onward, Irish society existed in a paradoxical state simultaneously colonial and nationally autonomous. This duality became a persistent source of cultural tension within Irish literature, manifesting in four central thematic concerns: land, religion, nationality, and language. The profound cultural trauma engendered by this condition gave rise to Anglo-Irish literary expression. A quintessential figure of this tradition and arguably its architect was William Butler Yeats (1865–1939), a leading voice of the Irish Literary Revival and a pivotal contributor to European literary modernism during the 1920s and 1930s. While the late 19th-century Renaissance invigorated Irish nationalism with new texts and cultural energy, Yeats aspired to forge a modern Irish literature in the English language. Until the end of his life, he produced works of profound significance, particularly in poetry, often exploring paradoxes of identity and emotion. As Yeats himself declared: “I owe my soul to Shakespeare,

to Spenser, and to Blake... and to the English language in which I think, speak and write...; my hatred tortures me with love, my love with hate.” In 1923, just one year after Ireland gained independence from England, Yeats was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, recognized for expressing “the soul of a whole nation” through his poetic oeuvre.

Keywords: *Irish literature; Ancient Western European literature; James Joyce; “Dubliners”; “The Dead”*

Introduction

The early twentieth century marks the emergence of a distinct literary phenomenon: the modern short story cycle. This development is exemplified by the publication of James Joyce’s *Dubliners* in 1914, which is widely regarded as a foundational work in the genre. The modernist short story cycle retained many of the characteristics previously identified in earlier narrative forms, but now rendered with greater stylistic refinement. The influence of the Renaissance is palpable, particularly in the shifting themes and motifs that distinguish these stories from their predecessors. In a 1904 letter to his schoolmate and friend Constantine P. Curran, Joyce revealed that he was composing a series of epiphanies that would soon be published under the title *Dubliners*: ‘I am writing a series of epiphanies – ten – for a paper. I have written one. I call the series *Dubliners* to betray the soul of that hemiplegia or paralysis which many consider a city.’ (Letter to Curran of early 1904, in *Letters*, I, 1966, p. 55; *Selected Letters*, 1975, p. 22.)

The narrator in each of the stories in *Dubliners* follows a consistent trajectory, tracing the stages of life from childhood and adolescence to maturity and eventual engagement with public life. It is no coincidence that *Dubliners* is often considered an archetype of the short story cycle. In such cycles, where characters inhabit the same geographic space, a pronounced sense of mutual estrangement frequently emerges. The narrative segmentation mirrors the boundaries that define their everyday existence. Characters who walk the same streets and whose stories unfold side by side remain, often unknowingly, indifferent to one another. This structural unity and the tension between individual narratives are hallmarks of the modernist approach to the short story cycle. Joyce’s influence is unmistakable in the works of later American modernist writers such as Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, and William Faulkner, all of

whom adopted and adapted the short story cycle form in their own literary explorations.

The representation of Irish history and national identity stood at the forefront of twentieth-century Irish literature. The pursuit of Irish national identity has been a central objective for writers from the early Literary Revival to the era of contemporary Irish fiction. James Joyce, in his narrative approach, drew extensively upon his personal experiences in his homeland. Through a distinctive lens, he portrayed Ireland as a nation afflicted by paralysis a metaphorical condition shaped by the social, religious, and political forces that profoundly influenced the moral fabric of Irish identity and played a pivotal role in the exploration of national consciousness.

Joyce, both directly and indirectly, used his literary works to critique the Irish people’s attachment to the past and the constraints imposed upon them by religious and social conventions. His writing constitutes a form of protest against the very structures that many Irish citizens were unwilling or unable to challenge. Even in the era of a “globalized Ireland,” the nation continued to bear the weight of its oppressive historical legacy, finding itself in a world governed by submission and conformity. Through his characters, Joyce endeavored to give voice and conscience to Irish society. His artistic vision aimed at constructing an Ireland liberated from the stereotypes and limitations of traditional Irish life. Such a transformation, he believed, could only be realized if the nation itself broke free from inherited constraints and embraced a forward-looking perspective.

In James Joyce’s *Dubliners*, the short story “The Dead” offers a profound reflection on national identity through its protagonist, Gabriel Conroy. Gabriel’s rejection of various aspects of Irish heritage including its language reveals a critical stance toward his homeland. This attitude resonates in contemporary Irish fiction, where characters often live in the present

while remaining psychologically tethered to the past. Such portrayals underscore the burdensome and inhibiting nature of historical memory for individuals navigating modern life. Joyce made a significant contribution to Ireland's political and cultural discourse by crafting literary perspectives on pressing social issues that confronted the nation in the twentieth century. He believed that the complexities of Irish history, the dominance of Catholicism, and the entanglements of politics exerted a profound influence on the Irish mind and modes of thought, ultimately shaping behavior and societal norms. Through his characters, Joyce depicted segments of Irish society that, in various ways, constrained the freedom of others sometimes even within intellectual domains. This realization compelled him to use literature as a weapon to critique the lingering flaws of Ireland's past, even when such critique targeted the very foundations of national identity. Gabriel Conroy, an educated and self-possessed Irishman, serves as Joyce's voice of dissent. Disillusioned by the limitations imposed by tradition, Gabriel expresses a desire for connection with European culture, which he views as more refined and liberating than the stifling atmosphere of Dublin. As a Dubliner who sees little of value in his immediate surroundings, Gabriel chooses instead to align himself with the sophistication of continental Europe. Through Gabriel's perspective, Joyce suggests that Irish identity should not be constructed through retrospective idealization, but rather grounded in the realities of contemporary Ireland and its dynamic engagement with the present.

James Joyce's rebellious stance toward Irish society was deeply rooted in his early life experiences, shaped by family, religion, and political disillusionment. Born into a middle-class Catholic family in Dublin in 1882, Joyce was the eldest son of John and Mary Jane Joyce. His early education at Clongowes Wood College, a prestigious Jesuit school, was abruptly interrupted due to his family's financial collapse. This downturn was closely tied to his father's political support for Charles Stewart Parnell, a prominent Irish nationalist leader. After Parnell's fall from grace and subsequent death, Joyce's father lost his job as a tax collector, plunging the family into poverty. This early rupture being forced to leave school,

friends, and familiar surroundings left a lasting impression on Joyce's psyche. He began to feel alienated, a theme that would later permeate his literary work. The experience instilled in him a desire to distance himself from the oppressive structures of Irish life, particularly the authoritarian and religious constraints he associated with his family and society at large. Despite excelling academically and mastering several European languages, Joyce remained fiercely independent in thought. He viewed the rigid morality of Irish Catholic households as a form of intellectual imprisonment. In a 1904 letter to his future wife, Nora Barnacle, Joyce expressed disdain for the social and religious order of his upbringing, describing his family as bearers of "distorted middle-class habits" and victims of a system that had left its mark even on their faces. This personal history of displacement, repression, and intellectual resistance profoundly influenced Joyce's literary voice. His works often critique the paralyzing grip of tradition and advocate for a more liberated, cosmopolitan Irish identity. Through characters like Gabriel Conroy in *The Dead*, Joyce gave voice to his own frustrations and aspirations seeking not only personal freedom but a cultural awakening for Ireland. „My mind rejects the whole present social order and Christianity home, the recognized virtues, classes of life, and religious doctrines. How could I like the idea of home? My home was simply a middleclass affair ruined by spendthrift habits which I have inherited. My mother was slowly killed, I think, by my father's ill treatment, by years of trouble, and by my cynical frankness of conduct. When I looked on her face as she lay in her coffin – a face grey and wasted with cancer – I understood that I was looking on the face of a victim and I cursed the system which had made her a victim” (Letters, II: 48) (Seidel, M., 2002: 42).

From James Joyce's perspective, the Catholic Church an institution that wielded not only religious but also political authority in Ireland was a source of domination, stagnation, and disillusionment. As a young Dubliner, Joyce made deliberate efforts to distance himself from these oppressive structures and used his literary work as a form of protest. He viewed Catholicism in Ireland as a system that fostered submission, alienation, and authoritarianism, and he regarded the Church as

a major impediment to both personal and national development. Like many of his contemporaries, Joyce turned to European culture and aesthetics in search of intellectual and artistic liberation. He left Dublin and spent time in Paris, London, Zurich, and even the United States. These travels exposed him to diverse cultures, races, and individuals, deepening his sense of estrangement from his homeland and sharpening his critique of Ireland's dominant ideals and educational methods. As a result, critics often perceived Joyce as indifferent to his country and people. Having left Ireland at a young age, he positioned himself as part of the modernist avant-garde and never returned to live in his native land, identifying instead with the role of the exile. In light of this, the final story in *Dubliners*, "The Dead," is often interpreted as semi-autobiographical. The narrative touches on themes that Joyce himself experienced, particularly the complex relationship between the Irish people and their homeland. For Joyce, the essential task of the Irish writer was not to promote patriotism, but to illuminate the cultural, economic, social, and political instability of contemporary Ireland. Through his writing, Joyce renounced the Ireland of his time and sought spiritual peace beyond its borders, finding solace in literature itself.

Conclusion

As has been noted on multiple occasions, from the early 20th century onward, Irish literature began to distinctly reflect themes of significant cultural and historical relevance. These themes found expression across the

prose, fiction, and drama of the period. Central to the literary focus of 20th- century Irish writers was the depiction of Ireland's history and the articulation of national identity. Consequently, many literary figures of the time concentrated their creative efforts on exploring Ireland's historical, political, and religious issues. From the twentieth century onward, Irish literature became distinguished by its engagement with significant themes that found expression across poetry, drama, and prose fiction of the period. Irish authors increasingly focused on the historical, religious, and political dimensions of their homeland, using literature as a medium to explore and reflect upon the complexities of national identity. Ireland itself emerged as a profound source of inspiration for many writers of the time, who sought to portray their native land and foreground thematic concerns that held particular resonance in the lives of the Irish people.

The economic prosperity of Ireland's past played a pivotal role in shaping the foundation of a strong and modern Irish state. This resurgence was further reinforced by improved economic conditions and the return of emigrant populations, contributing to Ireland's re-emergence as a robust contemporary nation. However, despite these developments, nationalism continues to be one of the dominant ideologies within Irish society. As such, the concept of modern Ireland underscores the pressing need to transition from traditional nationalism to a post-nationalist framework – one that enables a dynamic reconstruction and reform of Irish culture and identity, grounded in the nation's historical legacy.

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