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### Is Literature Above Politics? James Joyce as an Author of “Political Enthusiasm”

What inspires a revolution? Some would respond that it is the people, while others may state that it is art. James Joyce, the Irish author famous for his pioneering views in the world of literature would argue that art inspires people, which inspire change. In fact, Joyce raises this question in his seminal work “The Dead.” When Gabriel Conroy is accused of being a “West Briton” because of his contributions to a magazine seen as sympathizing with British dominion, his response is simple: “literature [is] above politics” (Joyce, “Dead” 163). However, Joyce contradicts this statement within “The Dead” by showing how literature is the medium of politics, for it has power to incite change among its audience. Gabriel himself later uses the power of words in his toast to persuade those gathered together at his aunt’s dinner party to mourn the loss of the elder generation’s focus on “qualities of humanity, hospitality, of kindly humour” to the rising generation’s devotion to “new ideas and new principles” (“Dead” 177). Through this juxtaposition of ideas, Joyce shows us that literature is not above politics, rather it is the medium through which political ideas are best shared.

Joyce used his own skills in writing to express his disdain for English imperialism, which he saw as the architect for Ireland’s socially decrepit society. By creating literature that openly opposed British influence in Irish political affairs, Joyce sponsored what John Kilgore calls a “political enthusiasm,” which is a “term for the people’s self-authorizing, popular political actions directed against English tyranny” (377). Though Kilgore uses this terminology while studying the American Revolution, the same terms can be used for Joyce, because like the writers behind the American Revolution, Joyce blatantly criticized “English tyranny” in his country. In doing so, Joyce became a self-appointed leader in terms of developing a national identity through his writing. However, in order to successfully persuade his Irish audience to see the paralysis of their society caused by British imperialism, Joyce had to follow conventions of

political writing developed by British citizens living at an earlier time in the American colonies. This genre of persuasive political writing Kilgore calls “literatures of enthusiasm,” and he explains that they are a type of “protest writing” that encourages action and political dissent against domineering government. (371). However, what makes this form of literature so distinctive is the rhetorical moves it utilizes in order to draw the audience into the argument. This type of writing not only makes readers loyal to the theoretical cause, but it also inspires them to make an actual social change. The three factors that typify “literatures of enthusiasm” are: (1) it enlightens the audience to a “dire situation of injustice that demands a response;” (2) “like a sermon or political speech, [it] incites the reader to action” and creates a kind of democracy where individuals are responsible for their own interpretation and action, not governed by a supreme body; and (3) the “[l]iterature represents itself, and its audience, as participants in a group sharing the same affect of enthusiasm” (371). In this essay I will show how Joyce utilizes these elements that typify “literature of enthusiasm” in “The Dead” and “Eveline” in order to inspire political action against English dominion.

First, Joyce enlightens his audience to the unjust dominion of the male upper class, the creation of which he attributes to the corrupt influence of English imperialism. Joyce portrays this political idea in his writing through the character of Gabriel Conroy in “The Dead,” who exemplifies the creation and domination of the male hierarchy. This tie to British imperialism in the character of Gabriel can be seen in his family connections. While at his aunt’s holiday party, Gabriel gazes at a photo of his mother “which stands before the pierglass” (Joyce, “Dead” 162). In the photo, Gabriel’s mother has “an open book on her knees and [is] pointing out something in it to Constantine who, dressed in a man-o’-war suit, [lies] at her feet” (162). In Joyce’s description, we can see Gabriel’s mother as the English empire, the symbolic motherland. The representation of England as a mother can also be seen as an allusion to the metaphoric mother

of British colonialism, Queen Victoria. Gabriel's older brother Constantine who is dressed in a naval uniform represents England's colonizing army, which has plagued Irish shores throughout the latter's long history. Though he is physically separated from his mother, Gabriel continues to see her influence in his life in Ireland. The text states, "thanks to her, Gabriel himself had taken his degree in the royal university" (162). We see here that Gabriel's education is a result of his mother's intervention. This degree also grants Gabriel a significant amount of prestige and social standing in comparison to the other members of the party. Gabriel lauds this social standing over all others in his acquaintance to the point where he believes himself the superior in mind and manners as evidenced by his decision to dumb down his speech at dinner so no one will think he is "airing his superior education" (155). Thus we see Joyce pointing out the social problem of a complex male hierarchy established and maintained by the lingering thumb of British colonialism. Joyce shows through symbolism in his characters that the inequality in Irish society is arbitrary, while still entrusting his audience with the responsibility of determining a response to the injustice, which is fundamental to "literatures of enthusiasm."

Through the character of Gabriel, Joyce portrays how the influence of English imperialism created an unjust ruling male hierarchy within Irish society, as well as representing the social tensions this hierarchy created between Irishmen. In the seventeenth century, British colonizers seized Irish lands and employed Irishmen as workers on their holdings. Though many of these British landowners did not live in Ireland, they still exercised control over their holdings by setting the amount of rent Irish tenants had to pay to cultivate the land (Bastable 1-2). Thus we see that success in Irish life has historically hinged upon relations with British colonizers. Without the proper economic connections to the British, it would be unlikely for Irish citizens to make a living, let alone rise in social standing as well. We can see this elevation of men with positive relations with British colonialism and social downfall of those not connected with

imperial powers through the comparison of Gabriel and Teddy. Whereas Gabriel, as previously stated, has been educated by the customs of British imperialism, Teddy opposes these same customs. When the men at the party are discussing opera singers, and the voice of a “negro cheftan” is questioned, Teddy audaciously replies, “Why couldn’t he have a voice too?...Is it because he’s only a black?” (Joyce “Dead” 172-73). The text goes on to say, “Nobody answered this question and Mary Jane led the table back to the legitimate opera” (173). In this instance, Teddy delves into an unsuitable subject because his comments question the beliefs of those in greatest social power—the British—because of their vast political and economic power in Ireland. Unlike Gabriel, Teddy has not adopted the culture or the “education” of British society and, therefore, his opinions are ignored in while Gabriel’s are celebrated. Through the character of Gabriel, Joyce shows the unequal power of men in good graces with British colonial force; and through this depiction, he shows how those at the top of the male hierarchy use their social and political power to stifle the voices of those with differing views. Joyce uses these issues to force his readership to make a stance against the political attitudes they encounter in the text. As an audience, these readers are experiencing the same “affect of enthusiasm.” This inventive group experience will incite further action against colonial power under the assumption that art, in fact, inspires life.

Joyce further inspires his Irish audience to political action by highlighting the plight of marginalized minority groups displaced by the male hierarchy in Irish society. Joyce shows that the way these minority groups have been ostracized is through the deprivation of their political voice. By giving these groups a voice in his writings, Joyce invites his Irish audience as a whole to allow these groups to be heard. In “The Dead” and in “Eveline,” Joyce is helping those who have lost their voice in society to regain it. Eugene O’Brien refers back to Gayatri Chakravorty when he asks the question of whether the subaltern can speak—meaning that those who have

been ruled and colonized struggle to regain their voice even after they have been given their freedom from their oppressor (47). Joyce explores this concept of silencing the subaltern in great detail through the female characters in “The Dead” and “Eveline.” In both stories we see a prime example of the male superior power trying to stifle the voice of the female inferior power. This can be seen in Eveline’s struggle with Mr. Hill every Saturday night when she approaches him for grocery money. Though Eveline gives Mr. Hill all of her wages, he still insists, “she...squander[s] the money, that she [has] no head, that he [won’t] give her his hard earned money to throw about the streets” (Joyce, “Eveline” 29). We see in this instance that Mr. Hill is blatantly changing the narrative; he is manipulating the reality of his relationship with Eveline in order to gain and sustain greater power over her. The effect of this re-creating of truth is the elimination of Eveline’s own voice for the voice of her father in the interpretation of her actions. However, the example of oppressed women in *Dubliners* represents an even larger idea of colonialism. O’Brien states, “Female subjectivity in these stories is created by identification with a male other whose sole aim is to dominate and repress it, a process that parallels that of the broader imperial and colonial project” (53-54). Thus we see that the domination of the character of Mr. Hill symbolizes not only the oppression of women in Ireland in the early twentieth century, but also the meta-political theme of British imperial oppression towards Ireland. Just as Eveline was unable to separate herself from her persecutor, Joyce argues that Ireland has never been able to cut itself off from the colonial influence of England. The implied message, therefore, is that unless Ireland politically unites in rebellion against British domination, she, like Eveline, will remain nothing more than “a helpless animal” (Joyce, “Eveline” 32).

This desire to keep the subaltern (the oppressed) silent can be seen in “The Dead” in Gabriel’s discomfiture following his conversation with Lily after entering his aunts’ home. We read: “He was still discomposed by the girl’s bitter and sudden retort. It had cast a gloom over

him which he tried to dispel by arranging his cuffs and the bows of his tie” (Joyce, “Dead” 155). In order to restore his positive self-image, Gabriel falls back upon what he sees as the markers of his superiority to Lily: his clothes and social importance. Gabriel has a career that allows him to dress up in a shirt and tie and, unlike Lily, he is a guest to this grand gathering while she is the help. By reinforcing the gross difference between their importance in terms of financial resources and social opportunities, Gabriel is able to remain, at least in his eyes, the superior power. Gabriel in this instance is trying to use his power to manipulate Lily into silence. He does not want her to talk back to him again, so he decides to show her how much her silence is worth. In these examples from “Eveline” and “The Dead” we see through the character of Gabriel how Joyce is showing the unjust dominance of the male hierarchy. However, in the example of Lily, Joyce shows the hope he has for the groups that have previously been silenced by imperialism. Like Lily, he wants those who have been ignored to talk back, to take control of their own narrative, to not let the power of the male hierarchy keep them silent. Through these contrasting examples of female characters, Joyce inspires his readers to action by giving them the prime example of what not to do and, conversely, what they need to do to create a change.

In order to strengthen the common “affect of enthusiasm” he has created within his stories, Joyce represents the various backgrounds and social situations of his Irish audience. By representing the different factions of Irish society honestly, Joyce is deconstructing the false narrative that the Irish privileged male hierarchy has created. In effect, Joyce is allowing all Irish citizens the opportunity to be participants in the development of a postcolonial Irish identity by recognizing their diminished social circumstances as a result of English imperialism. By not ignoring the minority groups who have been oppressed by colonialism, Joyce is creating a literary environment with which all Irish citizens can identify and, as a result, bond together as “political enthusiasts” to create positive social change. One marginalized group that Joyce

reaches out to in particular is women in Irish society through the characters of Aunt Kate, Aunt Julia, and Mary Jane.

Through the representation of his female characters, Joyce seeks to honestly portray how women were inhibited by the Irish imperial system. In “The Dead,” Joyce paints for us a picture of life for a woman living in Ireland during the early 1900s, and the portrait we receive is that an Irish woman is most likely unmarried and making her living teaching children. Historical evidence supports this portrayal as records state “that for over a century following 1841, Ireland had the lowest marriage and birth rates in the civilized world” (Henke and Unkeless 33). Some historians attribute this statistic to the after-effects of the famine of 1845, which decimated economic earnings among households in Ireland for over a hundred years because “[i]t normally took a young man fifteen to twenty years to achieve a modicum of security” (33). Marriage then became an “unromantic business involving acquisition of money and property on the bridegroom’s part in exchange for presumed security on the bride’s” (35). From these historical details we see that prospects for Irish women in the early 1900s were bleak whether they were married or single. Married, they faced a life tied to men who likely did not love them, and instead (as shown in “Eveline”) exploited them for menial labor. Single, these women faced a life fraught with uncertainty because of the limited opportunities for women in the workforce. Most of their opportunities existed in office work, domestic affairs, teaching, and nursing. However, even in these areas jobs were limited and education qualifications were high (38). The best choice for a young woman was in teaching—more specifically, in music teaching like the Miss Morkans. In the characters of the Miss Morkans we see Joyce’s mission to accurately portray the quality of life that was common for women at the time of the publication of *Dubliners*. Though we learn in “The Dead” that “[Mary Jane] was now the prop of the household” because she plays the organ in church and teaches many students, that “old as they

were [the] aunts also did their share by singing in the church choir and giving piano lessons on the side,” Joyce also informs us that “they lived a very modest life” (Joyce, “Dead” 152-53). This information shows how severely women were inhibited by the British imperial system, which favored men and patriarchs. Consider this: what if the Miss Morkans were bachelors and not spinsters? Three unmarried men, without families, contributing all their wealth together would likely make much more than a “modest” income. Yet because they are women (spinsters), they are limited in their earning potential and excluded from the same quality of life as their male counterparts (bachelors). By including this example of injustice in Irish society, Joyce is fulfilling the third tenant of “literatures of enthusiasm” by representing Irish society as it is and not allowing the Irish patriarchy to control the narrative of women’s lives any longer. In effect, by recognizing the poor social conditions of women (which is only one of the many marginalized groups in early twentieth-century Ireland), Joyce is targeting his “literatures of enthusiasm” to all individuals in Irish society in order to inspire a united “affect of enthusiasm.”

The effect of portraying Irish society honestly was a starting point for those with initiative to create positive social change. Ireland, at the time of Joyce, was extremely segmented according to economic, social, and political factors, making a movement of unification paramount to creating the momentum necessary for a cultural Irish revolution. Just as the settlers in the British colonies were able to unite themselves under a common goal and idea of liberty, Joyce outlines the need for change and creates a community founded upon the same “affects of enthusiasm” in order to forward unified action against the tyranny of imperialism.

However, it is through the character progression of Gabriel that Joyce most poignantly inspires his readership to the epiphany of “political enthusiasm.” Joyce argues that the Irish male hierarchy needs to break free from its imperialistic urge to suppress and control. This is exemplified in the instance of Gabriel’s consideration for his wife’s need for self-expression and

reflection in the hotel. By letting Gretta tell her true history—a tale of her lost love—Gabriel is acknowledging that his knowledge of the past is not authoritative, and is allowing room for discovery and growth (“Dead” 194). Vincent Cheng explains, “Gabriel’s self-conscious willingness finally to grant Gretta a private space of her own, in which she can be her own emotional subject, inscribes a possible alternative by which to break free from the culturally-encoded male pattern prescribed” (362). The alternative that Cheng is alluding to is the Irish male patriarchy’s recognition of Irish nationalist voices—allowing the Irish people to interpret their identity for themselves instead of the imperialistic identity they have long held. Through his writing Joyce shows that there is hope for the Irish patriarchal system to change and respect those it previously repressed. In doing so, Joyce “incites...reader[s] to action” by giving them a goal to seek, but gives the responsibility to the reader to decide how to protest colonial tyranny in their own social spheres.

Joyce shows that when the Irish patriarchal system is finally ready to acknowledge the needs and the voices of those who have been marginalized by the colonial structure, then—and only then—Irish society will experience the awakening from their long-endured paralysis. This was the ultimate goal that Joyce sought in his life as an author. His brother Stanislaus Joyce records, “His burning desire was to live. ‘To life, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life.’ The will to live, he would say, was paralyzed in Ireland” (Joyce and Giovanelli 496-97). Joyce saw in Ireland a lifeless society. However, he saw potential for the rebirth of vigor, of passion, of life in the Irish people outside the bonds of the imperialistic hierarchal system through political writing that inspired social change. Like the founding fathers of the American Revolution, Joyce is symbolically giving the Irish people the matches to use to burn down the tyrannical order of imperialism. Though Joyce educates his audience regarding the injustices of Irish society, he does not command or instruct his people how they should exercise their social

influence. He leaves the ultimate decision of how to improve postcolonial Irish society to the reader. Kilgore likens this process to a conversion. He says, “Readers are to be converted into lovers of liberty and are to contribute to that liberty with their own actions” (Kilgore 380). So we see that not only is it necessary for “literature of enthusiasm” to educate an audience, but it must also empower the audience to action strengthened by personal conviction.

Joyce shows through his politically charged “The Dead” and “Eveline” that literature is not above politics, but is actually a medium for political movement. Joyce’s instrumental role in creating a postcolonial literary tradition in Ireland opened up a host of possibilities for Ireland’s creation of a national identity in the wake of generations of British imperialism. Through “The Dead,” and “Eveline,” Joyce sought to establish a foundation of literature that demanded greater justice, liberty, and equality for those citizens who had been previously oppressed by England, similar to the authors of the Declaration of Independence in another British colony. In Gabriel’s final thoughts he decides that “[t]he time ha[s] come for him to set out on his journey westward” (Joyce, “The Dead” 194). This change in direction can be seen as symbolic of Ireland’s turn against England (to the east) and towards the U.S. (the west). In essence, Gabriel is turning from the traditions and practices of the old world and embracing the idea of liberty and equality represented in the new world. This is not to suggest that Joyce desires Ireland to adopt the American dream or idea of government, but rather that he wants Ireland to adopt the same attitude of “political enthusiasm.” For only after Ireland has rid itself of the stink of imperialism can it develop its own national dream and identity—as its brothers in U.S. have done.

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