# *BIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENTS IN JOYCE'S FICTION*[1]

***Abstract**: Throughout Joyce's work there are major, unmistakable elements relating to the author's biography as well as personal leanings and options. The present paper aims to pinpoint the influence of the author's life on an astoundingly, unsettlingly novel literary work, which endeavoured to experimentally renew the very use of language in literature, while exuberantly exploring the overall resources of language – aided by good quality (though generally misunderstood) symbolism. The contribution briefly presents such highly relevant aspects as the straitened circumstances of Joyce's childhood, his intellectual opposition to the strict Roman Catholic orthodoxy (preached in the Jesuit boarding school evoked in* "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man"*), his almost permanent struggle with dire poverty, partly attributable to the fact he had something of his father's improvidence; Joyce's oblivious attitude towards both the political and literary trends aspiring at freeing Ireland, while thoroughly proving a rebel among rebels, his attraction for cosmopolitan, or rather internationalized European culture, his outstanding linguistic capabilities (e.g. Italian was his family's home language for a number of years); how his youth, adolescence and adulthood were affected by the ideas rooted or germinating in his mind and the events around him – cf. the evocation of the ordinary lives in Dubliners, both realistic and parallel to deep symbolic meaning. A number of personal (rather quizzical) queries are finally presented.*

***Keywords**: biography, experimentalism, rebel.*

In the present paper, we start from the assumption that much of Joyce's work is the result of an inner struggle, in which the author's personal ego grappled with the broader lines of outer reality – including society and the literary scene of the time. Joyce changed literature radically, mainly by rebuilding both internal and external narration, and interfering with the public conception of the daily conscious and the nightly subconscious. For Joyce, language was a product and a stimulus of the subconscious imagination. His otherwise revolutionary experiments he did not look upon as such, nor did he deem them innovations, but mere solutions for the intellectual and literary problems he ardently tried to cope with.

Personal, literary and intellectual elements blend in Joyce's complex literary achievement: the figure of the Father, the question of Irish nationalism, the hindrances and limitations of the spiritual and literary environment of the day, the (assumed) neo-puritanic attitudes of the inter-war British (and American) literary circles, the quirks and intricacies of Joyce's own ego, etc. The author was rejected by publishers, his writing was often suppressed by censors, came under attack by critics, and was misunderstood by most readers.

Born on 2 February 1882, as the eldest of ten surviving children, James Joyce was son to John Stanislaus Joyce, a tax collector at the time when James was born, who was proud to be a gentleman, the offspring of an old and important Cork family (as well as a genial lounger endowed with some musical talent); that was later on perceived by the author as the main cause of the economic straits into which the household was caught during the boy's early years. John had failed in a distillery business, and later on tried various jobs and occupations, including politics. The young Joyce seems to have inherited his father's improvidence. Contrarily, Joyce's mother, Mary Jane Murray, ten years younger than her husband, was a proficient pianist, equally faithful to the Roman Catholic Church and her husband; she tried hard to maintain middle-class façade.

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From the age of six, Joyce was educated by the Jesuits (whom he later thanked for teaching him to think straight, while rejecting their religious ideas), at Clongowes Wood College, and at Belvedere College (between 1893 and 1897), expensive boarding schools that the author described in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.* Then, in 1898, he went to University College, where he studied modern languages; there he came into contact with the works of Henrik Ibsen, St. Thomas Aquinas and W. B. Yeats. His subsequent nomadic life took him first to Paris (1902), where he ostensibly started reading medicine, but after a year of work as a journalist, teacher and in other occupations, confronted with difficult financial conditions verging on starvation, he had to return to Dublin as his mother was dying. From 1904 he lived with Nora Barnacle, a former chambermaid from Galway, whom he married in 1931 (when his father died). Afterwards the Joyces stayed in Pola, in Austria-Hungary, and in Trieste, the then Austrian port on the Adriatic, which was a cosmopolitan city and, at the time, the world's seventh busiest port (1905-1915); there Joyce taught English at the Berlitz school. His European peregrinations formed an almost uninterrupted pattern. "But when the restraining influence of the school was at a distance I began to hunger again for wild sensations, for the escape which those chronicles of disorder alone seemed to offer me. The mimic warfare of the evening became at last as wearisome to me as the routine of school in the morning because I wanted real adventures to happen to myself. But real adventures, I reflected, do not happen to people who remain at home: they must be sought abroad." (*Dubliners*). Refusing a post in Dublin (teaching Italian literature), Joyce continued to live abroad. His stay in Trieste, though nomadic and poverty-stricken, was nevertheless productive in literary terms. The struggle with dire poverty was to continue into his middle years. After a short period spent in Rome, in 1906-1907, as a bank clerk, Joyce came back to Trieste. When World War One started, Joyce, his wife and the two children, Georgio and Lucia, had to leave Trieste, arriving in Zürich. In was in Zürich that he began working on *Ulysses* (in that highly productive year, 1914), in spite of his serious eye problems, for which he had to undergo surgery. Joyce died at the age of fifty-nine, in January 1941, in Schwesterhaus vom Roten Kreuz in Zürich. His last words are said to have been, "Does nobody understand?" Still, Joyce's literary fame has grown enormously since his death; he is now considered one of the rare novelists that have genuinely and inexorably searched deep into the human soul's recesses, the author about whom one critic wrote "James Joyce was and remains almost unique among novelists in that he published nothing but masterpieces."

The poverty he and his family lived through, the support and subventions from friends and family, the cramped, squalid accommodation they had to live in, etc., are indirectly or symbolically reflected in his masterpiece, *Ulysses*. Consequently, features typical of his friends and acquaintances in Trieste, Zürich and Paris are conveyed to characters in the book. For instance, Nora's characteristic language becomes the voice of Molly Bloom. After the war, Ezra Pound persuaded him to come to Paris, which Joyce did, living there for the next twenty years; it was in fact Ezra Pound who started marketing Joyce's works.

Though frequently accused of cosmopolitanism, Joyce was an exile. Actually, Joyce is considered by most critics to be the twentieth century's absolute exiled writer. (His only play, published in 1918, is significantly titled *Exiles*). Paradoxically, Joyce was both moulded and repelled by his native country. The interrelated short stories in *Dubliners* deal with the lives of common people, his fellow countrymen, seen from a deeply symbolic angle. The author's self identity is exposed and influenced by the various stages of life, which he now started to explore: adolescence, youth, young



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adulthood and maturity. At the same time, he repudiated Catholic Ireland, especially in an attempt to declare artistic independence (cf. his life-long dedication to writing). This quest for artistic *freedom* took support on the examples of earlier Irish writers who had allegedly failed to secure an independence that represented, in Joyce's view, the prerequisite and the very goal of writing. After 1912, Joyce never returned to Ireland, and yet reference to his native country remained essential to all his writings. Dublin is the scene of much of the protagonists' *odyssey*, during which they establish contacts with an astonishing variety of characters (some of whom are in fact non-fictional). Stephen's "differentness" and his feelings of alienation in *Ulysses* are presented as a counterpart to the issue of loyalty (viz. the character's loyalty to Ireland – and, implicitly, to the maternal figure).

Here is a summary sketch of Joyce's own literary *Odyssey*: When still an undergraduate, in 1900, he saw the publication of his review to Ibsen's last play, *When We Dead Awaken*, in the *Fortnightly Review*. The same year he started writing the poems that were to make up *Chamber Music*, published in 1907. His first short stories were published in the Irish *Homestead* magazine in 1904. *Dubliners* appeared in England in 1914, although he had tried to arrange the publication of the book in Ireland. Ezra Pound, an advocate of modernism and modernist authors, helped to organize financial support in order to keep Joyce writing during his most straitened years. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* appeared in 1916 (though it had been published serially in Harriet Weaver's *The Egoist* in London, from 1914 to 1915),[1] raising Joyce to international reputation as a remarkable author; the book was at the time the most complex, most consummate modernist book in Europe. Very much as in *Dubliners*, Joyce evokes past while stubbornly distancing himself from it; the book maps out the evolution from Catholic boyhood to young adulthood of a man harassed by a yearning to be a literator. The first instalments from *Ulysses*, the book Joyce had been planning to write since 1907, started appearing in the American journal *The Little Review* in 1918, but publication was suspended in 1921, when a court banned it as obscene (most of the legal difficulties were caused by Molly's erotic reverie towards the book's end). For a while, *Ulysses* seemed to risk never appearing in full, yet, it finally appeared in 1922 in Paris, in a limited edition (followed by a similarly slim English edition, also printed in Paris). In 1920, Joyce had met Sylvia Beach, an American expatriate living in Paris, who owned a bookshop, and offered to publish *Ulysses*; Beach continued to publish *Ulysses* till 1930. The first unlimited edition was published in 1924, in Paris, as well. After 1930, the printing business was taken over by Paul Léon, a Jewish émigré from Russia, who lived in Paris. Léon's role in Joyce's subsequent activity was crucial, not only in helping him to cope with legal, financial and daily problems, but also in publishing, defining and proofreading his last literary production. It was equally Léon who, after the Nazi invasion of France, returned to the writer's flat in Paris to rescue the family's belongings, including much of Joyce's manuscripts. His last and certainly most demanding, stimulating and uncompromising book, *Finnegans Wake* – written in an unmistakeably Joycean language, a combination of variously selected linguistic fragments – was published in 1939, being listed as "the book of the week" in the UK and the USA. The book had been begun in 1923, when Joyce lived in Paris, suffering from glaucoma.

[1] The novel had been begun as a quasi-biographical memoir entitled *Stephen Hero*, between 1904 and 1906; only a fragment of the original manuscript has survived.



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Some of the notably significant episodes in Joyce's life, which laid an imprint on his personal, autobiographic mythology, are, we believe, as many starting points for the literary pinpointing of his own 'life adventure'. A rather minor one is, for instance, the episode – recounted in *A Portrait of The Artist as a Young Man* – when, during his school years, he got his glasses broken, but refused to reveal the identity of the culprit, being subsequently unable to do his lessons. Or, the fact that the title of the 1907 collection of lyrical poems, *Chamber Music*, was suggested, as the author later admitted, by the sound of urine tinkling into a prostitute's chamber pot, which he heard while he was living in Italy; the very musical quality of the poems (mainly ensured by the open vowels and the repetitions used) stands proof to it. But it is the really crucial events and biographic stances that were to strongly influence his writing; for example, receiving, while he was studying in France, the telegram which said that his mother was dying, followed by his (actual, or artistically imagined?) refusal to kneel in prayer beside her, a gesture tantamount to his formally giving up the Christian faith – and consequently delivering himself from various oppressive influences of the past; the various allusions to religion in the "Lotus-Eaters" episode in *Ulysses* are as many attempted definitions of escapism. Other biographic details were artistically melted into psychoanalytical components of his later writing. One of these relates to the theme of jealousy (cf. the story one of Joyce's former friends told, to the effect that he had had an affair with Nora, even while the writer was paying court to her). Similarly, the author's playing, in *Finnegans Wake*, with Jung's concepts of *Animus* and *Anima*, may be seen as a revengeful response by an embittered Joyce to Jung's analysis of his daughter (the Swiss psychologist believed that Lucia Joyce was too much influenced by her father's psychic system).

Likewise, most of the characters (or *personae*) of his work are indirectly based on several *prototypes* in reality. The main character (or the father-figure) in *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom, the Jewish advertising canvasser, his wife Molly, and Stephen Dedalus can all be identified, be it loosely, in Joyce's biography. Various critical commentaries attributed parts of Bloom's identity / literary substance to Joyce's improvident father, or to Ettore Schmitz (a.k.a. Italo Svevo[1]), a novelist and businessman who happened to be Joyce's student at the school in Trieste. The figure of Buck Mulligan is largely moulded on that of Haines, the overly reserved English student.

*Intellectual* issues, telling of the age's main intellectual purport, are also apparent in Joyce's books. In *The Portrait*…, for instance, the life of the protagonist is delineated, from an early age towards maturity, including, very much as Joyce's own existence, education at University College, Dublin, and rebellion directed against the claims of family and Irish nationalism. Stephen Dedalus has an observant, respectful attitude towards religious matters, even thinking of entering a seminary, but then rejects Roman Catholicism – like Joyce himself. ("'Look here, Cranly, he said. You have asked me what I would do and what I would not do. I will tell you what I will do and what I will not do. I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it call itself my home, my fatherland, or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using my defence the only arms I allow myself to use – silence, exile, and cunning"). Again like Joyce, Stephen Dedalus finally determines to leave Ireland and go to Paris in order to face "the reality of experience", and become an artist. Joycean "culture" is in actual fact the refined product

[1]*Italo Svevo* (1861-1928) was an Italian novelist and short-story writer, best known for the novel *Confessions of Zeno* (1923).



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of a many-sided response to various pressures, mainly psychological, sociological, aesthetic, political, and economic in nature.

A confirmed rebel himself, Joyce also grew up among rebels. However, in the context of the literary and political movements that purposed to liberate Ireland, he instinctively aspired towards a broader European culture (and his special linguistic gift supported him along that arduous way). Opposed to the 'Celtic twilight', Joyce read Ibsen and studied Dano-Norwegian. The artistic coteries in Ireland held little attraction for him, just like such great names of the Irish Renaissance as Yeats and Synge, which he treated with arrogant contempt. His life of adolescent irregularity, paralleled by his early scandalous works, the fruit of his powerful and original intellect, was on a par with his intolerance of both the narrowness of his college curriculum, and the strict Roman Catholic orthodoxy which was the rule in the school establishments of the time.

*Ulysses* is an oblique portrait of Joyce himself. The summed up account of a single day's experiences in 1904 Dublin, *Ulysses* is also, as the title implies, an epic, jocularly or loosely reflecting Homer's *Odyssey*, playfully (as suggested by some critics) echoing or paralleling the great classic Greek epos. This Homeric perspective is obviously another intellectual, artistic influence, imposed on Joyce by his humanistic studies. Actually, the *Homeric* structure of *Ulysses* can be transparent for most readers; put in a rather linear, simplistic manner, Stephen is (symbolically / metaphorically) looking for a father (e.g. Chapter One in *Ulysses,* referred to as "Telemachus" by Joyce, anticipatively links Stephen and Leopold), and Leopold Bloom may be seen as the wandering Ulysses (because he is, archetypically, a *wandering Jew*). The character of Stephen Dedalus gains more vividness on account of the parallel to Telemachus, the son of Ulysses, king of Ithaca (just another island – like Ireland), though the Homeric parallels are more often than not ironic (v. the barmaid-Sirens). The novel counterparts to the Homeric epic are sometimes endowed with a farcical effect (e.g. punning or humorous, or fitting the author's sense of social or political irony). For instance, the comparison between Molly Bloom and faithful Penelope is broadly ironical. Be it as it may, we believe that one may also add that Joyce's peregrinations could be perceived as largely reflected in his special interest in the character of Ulysses / Odysseus. Although it is only in Chapter Seven that Bloom and Stephen (i.e. the prototypes of Odysseus and Telemachus) meet for the first time, Leopold Bloom's own *Odyssey* (i.e. the wanderings of Ulysses) occasions a lot of path-crossing, the meaning of which is mainly up to the reader to judge and assess. The last three chapters of the book parallel Ulysses' home-coming to Ithaca. The Penelope fragment begins and ends with a *Yes*, representative of Molly's vitalistic optimism, no less than Joyce's belief that women are a positive life force. At bottom a hymn to the humanity to be found behind the common events of daily existence, *Ulysses* offers, in the opening pages of "The Lestrygonians", for instance, a record of Bloom's sensitivity towards the passing things of life. Joyce's parallel to the *Odyssey* was praised by his contemporaries as a great discovery, because it implied using *myth* to relate, in a human continuum, contemporaneity and antiquity (and, in the process, manipulate an analogy between reality and a pre-existing patterned discourse), and thus controlling, ordering, supplying shape and significance to the huge perspective of vanity and anarchy which was – then, as is unfortunately now – contemporary history. Such critics firmly believed that the use of the mythical method, instead of the narrative one, represented "a step towards making the modern world possible for art". The very artistic achievement of *Ulysses* is a gift of Joyce's own shrinking, recondite nature. The book, vastly long and intricate, tries to sound and unravel the very opulence of intimate thought, using a variety of styles – especially the



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'stream-of-consciousness' method, and deriving its added complexity from irony, epiphany and dramatic intensity. The author's own introspective nature pushed him to explore the most profound recesses of human consciousness and linguistic expression, e.g. when using the "interior monologue" technique to render the hero's fleeting thoughts, the very image of the fluctuating, "Protean" nature of reality itself (cf. also Stephen's complex musing on the reality or appearance of existence itself). Pushing experiment even farther, *Finnegans Wake* unearths mythologies and theologies in various cultures, symbolically consistent with the whole of human experience.

A fully original experimental book, using a multiple (even plethoric) narrative point-of-view, alongside detectable personal attitudes, intellectual and political feeling, as well as acute observation of human condition, *Ulysses* is written in a multitude of different literary styles (going all the way down from internal monologue, to first-person speculation, and to newspaper headlines) and linguistic varieties. An exuberant exploration of the total resources of language, the novel is a possible *sum total* of the modernist experiments of the first half of the 20th century. In the chapter commonly called "Molly's Soliloquy", for instance, authorial control, as expressed through punctuation, syntactical selection, comment etc., is completely absent.

Concluding, we may wonder if (auto)biographical elements in Joyce's literary work were so pervasive as to directly shape all, or most, of the author's artistic tenets and literary achievement. A dedicated artist of the first order, Joyce devoted his life of unremitting labour to natural, unaffected, inborn experimentalism and deep humanity, turned into genuine literary value. His *Ulysses* is one of the greatest literary achievements of the 20th century, and, as some critics say, of all time.

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