

Modernism and the Social Order

Linked to World War I and the rise of industrialization, modernist writers found themselves at the helm of a rapidly changing world and an entirely new way of living. Operating within an increasingly disjointed and fragmented society and disenchanted with the status quo, they sought to infuse new function, meaning, and purpose into what they considered cliché modes of artistic expression by upending standard literary rules and expectations. James Joyce's *Ulysses*' "Episode 18: Penelope" and *Dubliners*' "Eveline" as well as Virginia Woolf's *Monday or Tuesdays*' "The Mark on the Wall" support Barth's claims that modernist writers' employed an artistic strategy to deviate from standard linear narratives by undermining reader expectations as they pertained to plot, characters, cohesion, and conclusions. They also exemplify ironic and ambiguous juxtapositions that compel readers to deeper, more meaningful thought and awareness.

James Joyce's "Episode 18: Penelope," perhaps more so than any of the other stories exemplifies the modernist author's experimental diversions from established writing structures and formatting. Deviating from standard, linear structure through a stream-of-consciousness narrative, Molly Bloomberg's thoughts are presented to the reader unfiltered, seemingly as they occur. For instance, a train whistling in the distance causes her to think about "the poor men that have to be out all the night from their wives and families in those roasting engines" (Joyce 1,006). The thought of the hot train engines stirs memories of her formative years in sweltering Gibraltar and her close childhood friend Hester Stanhope. Molly remembers fondly "the lovely teas ... scrumptious currant scones and raspberry wafers" (1,007) they used to have. This brings to mind a postcard Hester sent her announcing her marriage to "wogger," who Molly believed was fond of her and wanted to entertain an affair.

She recalls how Hester's husband "held down the wire with his foot for [her] to step over at the bullfight at La Linea" (1,007). Thus, in a matter of just a few lines, while Molly lies motionless in bed, she (and the reader along with her) travels through space and time from Dublin to Gibraltar to Spain. All the while, Molly's story and character take on an increasingly definitive shape.

Stylistically, Joyce's short story checks many of the modernist formatting boxes. For instance, there is no traditional punctuation. Instead, eight incredibly long sentences are separated by paragraph breaks. Molly's thoughts comprise the entire narration. No other voice or sources interject. There is no discernably logical pattern of thinking. Molly's thoughts are discursive, and they do not adhere to organized space or time. Also, Molly's language—her unique voice, diction, syntax, turn of phrase, and overall style—lend authenticity to her character and foster an uncanny intimacy between her and the reader.

Virginia Woolf's short story "The Mark on the Wall" is an example of the modernist writer's effort to thwart reader expectations by undermining "standard fictional techniques of coherence and logic" (Cyr 200). In it, a singular female narrator gets lost in a meandering stream of thought prompted by a mark on the wall above the fireplace. As with Joyce's Molly Bloom, Woolf's female character's thoughts comprise the entire story. Throughout, the narrator rarely concludes an idea. Instead her mind flits from one topic to the next. Though her thoughts, at time, seem unrelated, they still manage to work together to encourage deeper thought and consideration. For example, while staring at the mark on the wall and concluding that she might never know what it truly is or where it came from, the narrator cannot help but consider the greater mystery of life in general. She becomes acutely aware of just how helpless and insignificant humans are within the grander scope of the universe. "The

inaccuracy of thought! The ignorance of humanity! To show how very little control of our possessions we have—what an accidental affair this living is after all our civilization” (Woolf 51).

As is customary in modernist literature, this approach invites the reader to consider *how* the mind works and *how* people think—an innately subconscious process—as opposed to *what* they think. It’s an unorthodox approach that casts the internal—represented by the narrator’s thoughts and feelings—as exceedingly more important and complex than the external.

James Joyce’s “Eveline” is an example of the modernist writer’s use of ironic and ambiguous juxtapositions that compel readers to deeper, more meaningful thought and awareness. In it, Eveline sits inside her Dublin home and stares out the window as the sunset. As with Molly Bloom, Eveline’s story unfolds internally, through a steady stream of often disjointed thoughts, memories, and emotions. For instance, as she looks at the “new red houses,” (Joyce 36), she recalls “one time there used to be a field there in which they used to play every evening with other people’s children” (36). This ushers in memories of her father who used to hunt in those fields. They were happier times when her mother was still alive, before her father turned abusive. Eveline must decide if she will remain at home, where she works hard only for her father to take her money, and she is forced to care for children who are not her own or if she will run off with a sailor she’s fallen in love with named Frank. He has a house in Bueno Ayres and is kind toward her. As in the other two stories, the “daydreamer’s inactivity [is] juxtaposed to the mental motion of reflection,” (202). That is to say, most of the story’s action takes place internally, between the narrator’s two ears. Physically, however, she is not only still, she is also stuck. Though she is presented with a

way out of her unhappy reality, she ultimately chooses not to run away with Frank. Instead, she remains captive to a father and a life she hates but seems helpless to escape. Her story compels readers to consider their own limitations—real, imagined, and self-imposed—and to what degree one's internal limitations control or supersede one's physical reality.

In the end, both Joyce and Woolf infuse new function, meaning, and purpose into what they considered cliché modes of artistic expression by upending established literary customs. *Ulysses*, *Dubliners*, and *Monday or Tuesdays* employ artistic strategies that deviate from standard linear narratives, undermine reader expectations as they pertain to plot, characters, cohesion, and conclusions, and utilize irony as well as ambiguous juxtapositions that compel readers to deeper, more meaningful thought and awareness. And, in doing so, they challenge nineteenth-century social order.

Works Cited

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