James Joyce's Dublin - Audio

Importance of Dublin to Joyce's writing

Sara Haslam

I'm Sara Haslam and I'm here with Emer Nolan who is Senior Lecturer at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, and Declan Kiberd, who holds the Chair of Anglo–Irish Literature and Drama in University College, Dublin. Can you both tell us something about where we are sitting and talking now?

Declan Kiberd

We're in Mulligan's Pub, which is mentioned in the short story 'Counterparts'. But unlike other pubs in Dublin which got mentioned in Joyce was never corrupted by this. It never became a kind of Joycean Disneyworld. It remained steadfastly what it was, an old Dublin city pub, pretty dim, even in the middle of the day as we're talking now, probably quite like what it was 100 years ago.

Emer Nolan

And of course the pub itself is a very important space in *Dubliners* as I think it was in Irish society at this time. Pubs have a lot of different meanings in Joyce, they certainly are homes away from home for a lot of the characters, specifically the male characters who might be fleeing from their homes and from their domestic responsibilities.

Declan Kiberd

The pub is also interesting in that there's a word used about the barmen in Joyce's Dublin which is that they're curates. So you have the men seeking from the curates in the pub, a kind of comfort that many of the women seek from the curates who are priests in the local church.

Sara Haslam

They're ministering to the men in some way in the pubs?

Declan Kiberd

Yes. Yeah. And it does seem as if, to Joyce, I suppose both are just alternative forms of escape, in drink or in the opium of religion. But one is in some ways equivalent to the other.

Sara Haslam

The new statue to Joyce was unveiled in 1990 and you'd think really in some ways he has to be known as *the* Dublin author. In what ways was his focus on this city new in Irish writing at the turn of the century?

Emer Nolan

I think it was a revolutionary step for Joyce to set all his fiction in his home town, in Dublin. In Joyce's day there was a big movement for literary revival and for the revival of the Irish language and Joyce in some regards at least, did resist aspects of that movement. And at a time when other Irish writers were telling the Irish people that they essentially belonged in the West of Ireland or in the rural places of Ireland, Joyce very much asserted that there was a distinctive Dublin identity, an Irish urban identity, and this was as creative and as important as the way that Irish people had lived in the past.

Sara Haslam

Can you characterise that Irish urban identity?

Emer Nolan

Joyce wrote about it in different ways himself over the course of his writing. It's in some ways a fractured identity. There is a sense that people in the city have not lived there for too many generations in some cases, they've come from other places. They have other memories of Irish experience that they in some cases would rather forget. When Joyce wrote in Dublin around the turn of the century, it was a city of unemployment, of underdevelopment. It was a small town, it was a provincial place. Dublin had had a grand history as the second city of the Empire, but since the early nineteenth century had been in decline. After the passage of the Act of Union, Ireland had lost its parliament, and so it lost a degree of its political identity. So in the early twentieth century there was a legacy of poverty and of displacement and loss, including the loss of the Irish language. At the same time, there were things happening in the city. There were political movements moving in a different direction. There was the movement for cultural revival. Joyce saw all of these things, he was sceptical enough at times about their possibilities, but I think he was very well aware that there were undercurrents and there were energies in this urban culture. He tapped into them in a very different way to other Irish writers, certainly by comparison with W.B. Yeats.

Declan Kiberd

I think that he loved Dublin and what Emer says is true, there is an attempt to balance the negatives with the positives. One thing I think that must have struck him was what an odd city it was. It didn't have a central intelligence behind it. It just was a set of villages that really got joined up with each other. And that's a reason why often there's a feeling of intimacy in any

situation, that you are in the heart of somebody's village, even though this is in another way a great conurbation.

Sara Haslam
Did any of those villages maintain their individuality?

Declan Kiberd
Yeah, places like Rathmines, Killester, Marino, Fairview, people would have been identified by different accents in Joyce's time.

Sara Haslam
Even in the city?

Declan Kiberd
Yeah, yeah. I would say so. And until comparatively recent times, until the effect of the electronic media kind of airbrushed those differences away, but yeah, there's a sense of the colour of locality all through Joyce, and that going from the north side to Ringsend is actually traversing a number of worlds. One thing that strikes me, I agree with Emer, I mean he wanted to celebrate the city and to oppose those who felt that cities were in some sense un-Irish, but there's also a sense in which the city as he describes it, is a very ruralised place. You know, it's filled with people who believe in the old folk taboos and practice old-fashioned folklore really, along with the traditional form of rule-bound Catholicism. It's in some ways as if the communities that form reproduce something like a rural community. Even in, you know, tenement buildings, that was true. Even like in the tenements described by Sean O'Casey, if you had six or seven families in the one big building which had once been a house of a great Anglo–Irish family, what you have an in effect is something like a displaced rural village in the guise of urban living. And I think in the same way that Joyce is using the anecdote or the short story as a form through which to mediate things, it's a set of linked stories that are halfway between a collection of stories and a novel, in the same way that Dublin is halfway between being a collection of villages and something like a European city. And he's trying to capture that inbetweenness as much as anything in the way he renders it.

Sara Haslam
Joyce had a very rich urban context in Dublin, you've said something about that already, can you describe any more different aspects of that richness? I'm thinking particularly perhaps of the number of statues that one comes across when one's walking around the city centre.

Declan Kiberd
I think that Joyce was fascinated by statues, and it has to do with his sense of the comic, going right back to Aristotle. Because Aristotle said the comic character is static, goes on

revealing himself, doesn't change, you know, makes the same mistakes over and over. And a frozen immobile state of a statue is, I suppose in Joyce's mind, a kind of epitome of one of the problems of paralysis in Dublin. But he's also aware that so many of the statues are part of that nineteenth-century pomposity that went with Empire, colonial occupation and all the rest of it. I think he's basically laughing at them. And it's interesting that the statue of Joyce in the middle of Dublin now, unlike most of the other ones, is not up on a plinth, it's among the people as one of them. He probably would have been slightly irritated at the very idea of being turned into a statue. But if there has to be a statue, let it be at ground level.

Sara Haslam
And you talk about the permanence of the statues, but there are ways, aren't there, in which new periods are symbolised by statues being torn down.

Declan Kiberd
Yeah, well, Admiral Nelson was blown up as part of the fiftieth anniversary commemoration of the Easter Rising in 1966. And a statue of Queen Victoria was removed in the 1940s from Kildare Street in front of our Dáil, our National Parliament, and stored for some inexplicable reason in the basement of University College, Cork. The history of Ireland is a history of statues, and the allergy of ordinary people to them. And I think that Joyce is definitely mocking that element of the nineteenth century.

Sara Haslam
Tell me something about the Liffey as well and what that symbolises in Dublin life?

Emer Nolan
Then as now the Liffey divided Dublin into a northern city and a southern city. This was a social division. Joyce reflects that in his stories. Joyce's own family started on the south side of the Liffey and by the time that Joyce was a young adult they were living in much less salubrious accommodation on the north side. The old medieval heart of the city had been in the south. Later the ascendancy capital was centred on College Green and the Houses of Parliament there. The great Georgian squares of Fitzwilliam Square and Merrian Square belonged to the south part of the city. But those were not really the aspects of the city that Joyce was most interested in. While not really showing us tenement life in the style of O'Casey, he didn't really show us the most deprived classes in Dublin. He concentrated on the lower-middle class which was his own people. How these people kind of negotiated the urban geography of Dublin through their own mental maps, that weren't really related to the official geography of Dublin. We see the city through the eyes of its native inhabitants. It's not necessarily described to us in a way that's helpful for readers outside the city. There are very few panoramic views of the city in Joyce; there are very few overall descriptions of the river or of the quays or of the situation of the city.

Sara Haslam

Which goes back to what Declan was saying about form. I think that's a really useful point, that we don't get that kind of grand novelist's vision of the interrelationship. We get a much more fragmented series of sections or individual really, individual stories, individual characters, mind maps as you say.

Declan Kiberd

He assumes intimacy on the part of the reader with all this, which is of course unnerving for most readers, even for Dublin people now. There's a sense in which the casual assumption of intimacy can be almost invasive. Even in *Dubliners* itself, it's quite a while before the city as such is mentioned. It's not a place that construes itself as such.

Sara Haslam

I think that's why it's so interesting, that he starts with a child narrator as well. Because a child narrator can't possibly have a panoramic vision, doesn't even know that, really know what material he's in charge of as he's speaking. So yes, we're brought into the text in a very uncomfortable and very incomplete fashion.

Declan Kiberd

It's almost like a form of Cubism before Cubism, because you're getting different ways in which a younger person, a slightly older person, then an adult of different kinds, the different ways in which they would see the city. And it seems to be at least as important as the city that's seen, is the way of seeing it. That's a very modernist approach.

Sara Haslam

There is a sense in which he's saying that Dublin is growing up through these stories. I mean do you think he's saying that about the city or do you think that it's really about the city as a character or is it really about just the pattern he's chosen for his narrators as they grow?

Emer Nolan

Joyce's vision of Dublin becomes somewhat more expansive as the stories proceed and as he moves away from the child narrators to the more mature figures in the later stories. But I also think there's always a counterpoint between an expanding consciousness and a very restricted and narrow consciousness as well. Even in the later stories we get glimpses of children and of childhood suffering and deprivation; we get glimpses of the lives of women such as Evelyn, and Maria in 'Clay', which again show very little hope of individuals being able to escape from their environment or being able to escape from the constrictions imposed on them. So I think that sense of constriction is there but maybe just within it Joyce is probing at the possibilities and registering the hidden potential in the culture and in the characters' consciousnesses as well.

Declan Kiberd

There's a tremendous yearning for freedom in so many of the characters beginning with the child subjects of the early stories, and the thing that often strikes me reading those early stories, is yeah, of course the environment defeats everyone in the end, but they're still free to range as children, even young children, wherever they want to go, in ways that a child wouldn't be allowed to now. And it gives them a much more immediate sense of the geography and the layout of the city. You know the way people nowadays are always accusing young people of having no sense of chronology, of depth, of the past, and maybe that's because they've been deprived of it by a different education system. But in the same way, a lot of young people don't have a sense of geography, because you know, they're driven from their music lesson back home again and they don't actually negotiate the space in between the way younger people in Dublin would have done 50 or 100 years ago. And I think that's partly what Joyce is capturing – the tremendous freedom in fact the young people had who went from say North Richmond Street out to Ringsend. I do think there's a kind of poignancy as well to the idea of kids being able to make an entire city their landscape.

Sara Haslam

What was modern about Dublin for Joyce do you think?

Declan Kiberd

Dublin was a port city, you know, the boys in 'An Encounter' are going past ships with continental sailors on the boats, and wondering if they might have green eyes. They're looking for exoticism; they're looking for the cosmopolitan. It probably had some of the qualities of a place like Liverpool had for John Lennon who, you know, got these records, you know, as they came in from America after World War Two. You know, I think any port city will always be a despatch point for forms of modernity.

Emer Nolan

And Dublin is a place where you can meet the modern within the context of something older as well, within the framework of community and familiar faces. You can walk down a street and meet people you know; people live by their wits and they traded stories and anecdotes and jokes. On the other hand, you could see a commercial culture beginning, even in *Dubliners*, Joyce talks about advertise and hoardings and poster bills and performances of musicals and music hall and all of this variety of different cultures that were intermingling on the streets. So I think really what you get in *Dubliners* is an intermingling of something traditional with something modern, and the street life of Dublin is of course very, very different to what we imagine in the metropolis in the same era in London or Paris. But because Joyce's is looking at something very familiar, having himself experienced a different kind of city, outside Ireland. I think he superimposes the two on each other in a very productive way.

Sara Haslam
And that's what I would like to pick up on now, the way in which he brings out detail. We do end up with a sense of history of the past in Dublin, but also the absolute specificity of individuals' lives and experiences, the tastes, the smells, the textures of Dublin, the colours or lack of colour. What are some of the best sections in the text for you which bring out that detail, that local colour perhaps, either in character or in place?

Emer Nolan
In the story 'The Two Gallants', there are a number of very telling moments, a number of very significant details are disclosed to us. I think the meal must be one of the most repulsive repasts that I've ever read about. And it's enjoyed very heartily by the character which I think is a way of disclosing to us something about his coarse tastes and something about his …

Sara Haslam
… poverty.

Emer Nolan
… poverty, yes. One of the reasons why he's confined to walking around Dublin is because he has nowhere else to go, he has nothing else to do and no money to spend on occupying himself.

Declan Kiberd
And he looks up and down, doesn't he, to make sure he's not seen going into that restaurant.

Emer Nolan
Yes. Yes. But he likes it very much.

Sara Haslam
He does, he makes a note of it …

Emer Nolan
He plans … he plans to come back. The men in that story are as degraded and as miserable in their own way as the unfortunate young woman.

Declan Kiberd
And the interesting thing is that in the last story, 'The Dead', there's a young serving girl, Lily, who has a coin thrust into her hand by Gabriel in a patronising and condescending gesture, because it's Christmas and he's 'rewarding the servant', quote/unquote, and she actually says, Lily, the young men that is out today is 'all palaver' and all that 'they can get out of you'. And it's a sort of back reference to that moment that you've mentioned in 'Two Gallants',

which is what makes me feel, reading the book, that it's more than a collection of stories. It's almost, but not quite, a novel and it's bolted together by those images that recur from story to story. It's almost like a detective, that any passing detail might be the supreme clue. You don't know at the time. Because like the passing of a coin is pretty ordinary, banal, but becomes a huge image in the book, not just in the story. And in the same way, any aspect of the passing scene, which he itemises in such concrete detail, might suddenly erupt into symbolism rather than just being the passing scene. And it puts the reader on a kind of perpetual mental alert, you know, you're trying to sift all this and decode it, which is partly what modern urban living was about, like the boys in 'An Encounter' wondering if the sailors would have green eyes.

Sara Haslam
Where is the fun? You've talked about the freedom that those boyish narrators have, is there any fun later, or does it get lost as the characters grow up do you think?

Emer Nolan
There's certainly conviviality, there's community, there's fellowship. It's probably more connected to the male world of the pub, rather than to the family.

Declan Kiberd
The overall situation in most of the stories is pretty bleak, and Joyce is diagnosing paralysis of course, yet there's tremendous energy in some of the conversations. You know, the actual use of language by these Dubliners, some of whom probably are still recent masters of the English language, and their use of English has the excitement of surprise.

Sara Haslam
Can you think of an example that you could read to us?

Declan Kiberd
'There … there they were at it, all the cardinals and bishops and archbishops from all the ends of the earth and these two fighting dog and devil until at last the Pope himself stood up and declared infallibility a dogma of the Church ex cathedra. On the very moment John MacHale, who had been arguing and arguing against it, stood up and shouted out with the voice of a lion: "Credo!"
"I believe!" said Mr. Fogarty.
"Credo!" said Mr. Cunningham. "That showed the faith he had. He submitted the moment the Pope spoke."
"And what about Dowling?" asked Mr. M'Coy.
"The German cardinal wouldn't submit. He left the church."
Mr. Cunningham's words had built up the vast image of the church in the minds of all his hearers."'

Emer Nolan

As well as a city of bricks and mortar and buildings and streets, *Dubliners* is a city of words. And one of the very important things that Joyce did for this city was to record the speech and the styles of speech of the citizens of Dublin, and to use Dublin's speech as a literary language for the first time. And it wasn't necessarily a lyrical dialect of Hiberno–English, it wasn't like the Hiberno–English that Yeats or Lady Gregory or other revivalists used in their studies of Ireland, their books about Ireland, but it has its own flavour and its own force and its own energy and its own creative possibilities.

Declan Kiberd

I agree with Emer. I think Joyce is quite critical of Yeats and Synge and the kind of baroque exotic language you get in their plays and say in some of Yeats's poems. He is saying that in some ways Ireland has become too colourful in the eyes of the outside world, and what you need is to capture more its everydayness. The right of a people to dignity and to be colourless at certain moments, and yet as Emer said, there's a tremendous energy, and it isn't just to do with the way Dubliners talk, it's the way Dubliners talk to people who've come in from the countryside, like Gretta Conroy when she's describing an old lover, says 'I was great with him' once from the Gaelic 'Bhi me mor leis, trath.' The word 'great' would be a kind of West of Ireland word. And there's a lot of that that Joyce picks up on. Of course he was a great musician, he had a wonderful ear, but there's a sense in which, again, the little detail tells so much. And yet is drawn into a tribute to the West of Ireland in the final part perhaps of the story and of the book. The place of which he'd spoken so critically, which captures Joyce's ambivalence I think that, you know, on the one hand, this is to be a counter revival book, which will not be baroque, will not draw on folklore in the ways that Synge and others did. And yet it's filled with folklore and in the end climaxes and one of the most moving tributes possible to the culture of the West of Ireland, perhaps 'out-Yeatsing' Yeats.

Emer Nolan

Some of the people in *Dubliners* dream of exile, they dream of emigration, they dream of getting away. Joyce himself left Dublin, but imaginatively returned to it again and again. It seems that in the end he wanted to say that it's only through remaking the place that you're from that you achieve a real freedom.