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Language of Early Twentieth Century Novels and Modernism

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Abstract

Any form of literature over the years has inherently been a marker of the development of the language it is made in. Language has been a tool and guide both to many a writers who have experimented with forms in particular. The evolution of language itself can be traced through literature. Understanding the use of language in a particular form of literary genre helps in understanding the backdrop of the era it has been made in. This paper attempts to examine the use of language and its experimentation to understand and analyse a particular era, early twentieth century modernism in this case, and the literature it produces through the famous twentieth century novels *Nostromo* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

Keywords- Language, Modernism, Genre, Experimentation, Twentieth Century Novel

One tends to feel that the expression of art in any form cannot be restricted to a predetermined structure of any sort. Art is diverse. Language through different mediums helps the authors, poets, painters alike to express their art. Language can maintain the uncertain and infinite possibilities of individual expressions. One can say literature represents one of the most persistent uses of language. Literary texts have the potential to motivate the reader in a very big way. Throughout the history of time, literature has carried the evolution of language with it. In a way, language has carried with it, the history of the people. Through various uses of language in various genres of literature, the poets have sung the song of the time they live in. The predicaments of the people, the place of the individual in the society, all are captured in the words of these writers. The style of languages employed in the specific literary eras thus becomes very important when we try to analyse and relate to the themes of respective texts. David Daiches says that the English language and English literature grew up with Chaucer (Daiches 89). Rightly so, his brilliant culmination of the English language in the Middle Ages paved the way for many others to explore the various possibilities of literature inherent in language. From Chaucer's Middle English literature to Shakespeare's vividly exploited theatrical skill, from the Romantics to the Victorian novelists, the English language has found itself used in various ways in the form of genres of literature. This paper

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attempts to understand the novel as a genre and how the language used in novels helps in the understanding of the issues of the individual and the society in a particular literary era by talking about the language of early twentieth century modernism with the help of Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo* and James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

The most striking feature about the novel as a genre is that it gives the author complete independence to use his language to portray real-life or fictitious settings in his own terms and make the reader believe in them. This genre allows the author and the reader alike to look at the use and style of language in a completely different and yet extraordinary way. To put it very simply, novels tell stories. In the history of the English language, the novel is fairly a modern form of literature although it has become the most popular and prolific of all the literary forms (Daiches 700). The novelist can manipulate the accent, sentence structure, phrasing, dialogue, and other aspects of language to create his own style of storytelling. Language plays a major role in expressions of accents and dialects that adds to the beauty and bigger theme of the novel, as in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*.

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the novel has had the comfort of anchoring in a social world dealing with human affairs, fortune and status. Jane Austen uses comedy of manners and ironic wit to portray the social world that she is born into and lives with. There is a loss of a secure sense of a common world when the public view of what is considerable in human action is altered and cannot be defined anymore. Towards the end of the nineteenth century the altruistic sense in imperialism increasingly becomes unwarrantable. The demand for a welfare state and increasing class-consciousness at home even furthers this growing separation between altruism and imperialistic designs. Who allegorises this better than Joseph Conrad in his *Nostromo*? It is Joseph Conrad's political novels that bring us into the twentieth century with this problem. Conrad's early novels are set in isolation from the society but beginning with *Nostromo*, he starts to deal with the themes of society. The most striking feature of *Nostromo* is Conrad's use of language to convey a rhetoric obscurity and loud presentation of events. His style in this novel express the disturbing changes which dominate this era of modernism and acts as a prototype for the other modernist styles, to be employed by different writers, which will completely change the scene of the novel and the English language as a whole, later in the century. "Conrad at his best thinks, as a poet does, in grand symbols" (Fraser 53). Despite his class-consciousness one can see Conrad use rhetorical language throughout to study the group of diverse people and social politics by introducing vague and non-sequential events in the novel. It is these instrumental uses of language that makes him a master of his art, distracting and making the reader accept the opacity of events in the novel. Amidst all the revolutionary conflicts, social problems of the fictional Costaguana that Conrad narrates, he manages to distract the reader in the delight of a ordinary feature of a novel that is *Nostromo*'s love triangle. Giselle is

“pliable, silent” and Linda “all ire and words” (Conrad 433). This mirrors his greed towards many possibilities towards selfish gains. It is the use of contrasting words like this that shows the conflict and eventual alienation of his self.

Conrad deflects from the traditional language that a novel speaks. The chronology is jumbled and the story is very opaque and large. Both the reader gradually grasps the language that *Nostromo* speaks when the story of his characters and the events of the fictional Sulaco’s revolutionary history are revealed. But this revelation happens unexpectedly, through actions or speech or in a letter or through recollection. The narrative fluctuates from third person who could rhetorically affect the events to sometimes an omnipresent narrator who leads the reader inside the unspoken thoughts and emotions of the characters. Conrad’s use of vividly descriptive language distorts the reader’s sense of time and space of the novel. He uses excessive imagery to describe an event or a place to such an extent that the reader reconnects and remembers these things when they become recurrent in certain instances in the narrative, not chronologically.

It is the many social changes happening in the turn of the century that allows novels to capture the confusion and enormity of the events even though all forms of literary genres go through major explorations in the later part of the twentieth century. The story itself is relatively simple. But the way in which Conrad plots the events and the narrative makes for a successful way to allegorically mirror the imperialistic world that Conrad lived in. One might say that Conrad ended *Nostromo* in an ambiguous note, but the fates of the characters towards the end when no one wins suggest Conrad’s well known pessimistic view of Socialism. The narrative technique, The vibrant description, the rich back story of the land, full representation of characters from all walks of life in a land gripped with revolution and the rich atmosphere along with the lack of redemptive tone in the end make the use of language in the novel convey Conrad’s distrust in Socialist ideas. “Industrialisation, Conrad’s novels suggest, destroys man’s sense of community, breeding alienation and chaos, producing societies lacking a deep-rooted moral and social consensus” (Swingewood132)

It is this sense of ‘alienation’ that increasingly shows up in the works of the later novelists. The culmination of the style of narration and language by Conrad paved the way for expressing psychological subtlety in a gradually ‘alienating’ society. Authors like James Joyce have looked to Conrad’s prototypical modernist techniques of language as examples of creative integrity.

The decade of the First World War is also a decade of experimentation and exploration in art form. The difference in private thoughts and public gestures obviously heightens men’s loneliness in a time of war and revolution. With the mainstream institutions and public gestures becoming increasingly meaningless, the individuals couldn’t communicate on a genuine basis. The loss of a world of public values and the search for the

true identity of an individual is captured by James Joyce in his bildungsroman *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. For Joyce, psychological mechanisms instead of the interactions that control normal language become a means of achieving ultimate reality. The protagonist Stephen Dedalus's strongest emotional responses are evoked by Joyce's clever use of words. But the language through which Joyce describes what Stephen feels or speaks comes with Stephen's train of great mental struggle bound by his upbringing and surrounding and the things that he wants and later comes to accept. In the novel, language is a very important counterpart of the child's feelings and experience. It is Joyce's choice of language that rings finality in Stephen's own understanding through words. The kiss of a prostitute feels like "the vehicle of a vague speech" (Joyce 108). Of course it is Joyce who is speaking these words but the reader is to understand these words as Stephen's emotions. An autobiographical element like this gives Joyce the freedom to use language to the purpose of his novel. The narrative is not first person, but it goes with Stephen's train of thoughts. Joyce uses skilful inflection of language to assert the varying dialects of Ireland (Stephen's home) but mainly to portray Stephen's changing individuality. From the use of lisping childlike language in the child's conversation to deal with the loss of the Irish language in Joyce's time to simple prose during boyhood and guarded irony in his diary entries towards the end, Joyce captures the emotional and psychological journey of young Stephen towards individuality in the end. The realistic use of language and art which the Joyce and his fellow modernists so often talks about is shown by the narrative which is sometimes filled with elements like rhyme, repetition or rhythm. It helps in conveying the arbitrariness and infinite possibilities in which language work. While Stephen believes that language is the reality through which he lives because language supposedly clarifies and glorifies, Joyce agrees that language don't always succeed in doing so and can be misused also.

Joyce is able to portray Stephen as a true artist, the artist that Joyce wants to be, following the language of art free from the shackles of familial bond, societal limitations, influences and misuses. The realism in aesthetics that Joyce and many other modernists want is conveyed in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. This yearning in Stephen and ultimately in Joyce echoes the loss of communication of the individuals in a society which is constantly changing, affecting the artist of the twentieth century who wants to find a muse through which he could ponder upon or find comfort in its grounds. In a society characterised by loneliness and loss of a shared public entity, Joyce feels the artist finds his muse only in true freedom and detachment from everything. This predicament of the artistic individual is beautifully portrayed by Joyce through his choice of narrative form and language in the novel. So, in stripping Stephen of his former identity, Joyce gives him the freedom that he doesn't have to use language.

Essentially, the task of the novelist of the twentieth century has been to accept that the bases of the world that he lives in is constantly changing and that he lives in a time of dangerous shifting and that he cannot fixate on stability. There may be no similarity in form of the novels of this time but there is a sense of coherence in the use of different styles in language that echoes the right mindsets of the novelists. The readers of modernist literature have to learn to read unfinished or unconnected or chronologically distorted works. But this is the essence of modernism. This use of language by the modernists reflects their states of mind which are disoriented and confused by the lack of communication on a real basis and the chaotic world they live in.

In a way, in Joycean manner, the novel in itself succeeds as a literary genre in the twentieth century. It disembarks from the traditional form of the novel of the eighteenth and nineteenth century and manages to capture the essence and issues of modernism and the effects it has on the individual and the society not only through themes and stories but more importantly in language, motifs and style. The study of a particular genre of a particular literary era through the use of language employed by the respective authors helps a great deal in understanding human lives. Inspired by the author's linguistic appeal and creativity, the reader can reflect on his own creativity to better understand his life and relation to the society and humanity as a whole. Language and literature are two sides of a coin. The advanced studies and research in the twenty-first century allows for learning of language through literature. There are many programs and studies throughout various universities that allow this study. Literature can be universal and employ the use of language and certain motifs to allow even the study of a cultural discourse. Literature can be the language through which humanity learns to better respect and appreciate each other.

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