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The Dilemma of the Modern Man in the Major Novels of James Joyce

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To my wife and my two sons

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Introduction

Introduction

An examination of the scene in the second half of the 19th century shows that it is characterized by confusing scientific rationalism, social anxiety and religious suspicion induced by the works of thinkers and philosophers like Darwin, Marx, Freud and Nietzsche. Their scientific and philosophical writings led to changes which extended to the following century that was almost on the threshold. Thus, by the turn of the century, there had been unprecedented technological advances accompanied by a landslide inclination towards material values at the expense of spiritual and religious ones. In addition, political unrest and a booming sense of nationalism reached the climax with the outbreak of World War I.

These new conditions induced a state of chaos and formed a challenge to man's religious, social and political attitudes and threatened the very nature of his relations with his fellow men. Amidst this new situation, man found himself in a state of confusion and bewilderment. The rift in social relations got wider and the individual felt himself isolated from the people around him. Divided between coping with the new set of values and the commitment to the old social, spiritual and moral codes, modern man began to undergo a sort of withdrawal, religious and moral indifference, which turned to be the malady of the age and a predicament he was entangled in.

Literature, in general responded to this new situation. This response has taken the form of a reaction from the writers of the era to the new issues of the age, especially, those who were just launching their new literary trend which came to be known as modernism. It is marked by a change in themes of literature and the problems it used to tackle. Modern fiction has explored new areas, new subject matters and new themes. Even characters and techniques are no longer the mere classical ones. For the modern novelist, and in the light of Freudian psychology, the individual's psyche, feelings and working of the mind have become of prime importance. For instance, the social and economic conflicts and the impact of the Industrial Revolution on the lower and the middle-class people,

as one has seen in Dickens's novels, gave way to the presentation of the new image of modern man who suffered new social maladies such as isolation, quest for the self, religious perplexity and sheer carelessness about morality as depicted in the writings of many modern novelists.

James Joyce (1882-1941), one of the most widely read novelists of the modern age is regarded by many critics as the facade and the epitome of the age and his works as a reflection and an interpretation of man's status in the 20th century. His writings present the unprecedented change that has touched the social, religious and political milieu of the century and how far man is crushed by these circumstances. They substantiate that Joyce never left a chance to ponder over the dilemma of man in that century. In a letter to the publisher of his Dubliners, Grant Richards, Joyce assures his deep interest and concern about the dilemma of the Irish people when he reveals that "he intends this collection of short stories to reflect a chapter of the moral history of his country"¹. Thomas F. Staley also touches upon this point when he refers to the true significance and dimensions of Joyce's delineation of the character of Stephen Dedalus of Ulysses:

"... Insofar as Ulysses reflects the impressions of the outside world on the mind and the art of James Joyce, so, too, does the character of Stephen reflect the struggle of the sensitive human being with all his weaknesses and strengths as he confronts the modern world."²

The present study is an attempt to examine how Joyce interacted with his age and its problems; and how he depicted the dilemma of man in his novels. Through the study of Joyce's two major novels, Ulysses (1922) and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916), together with frequent references to Dubliners (1914), which is a collection of short stories, one tends to reveal how Joyce presented the dilemma and suffering of modern man. Joyce's engagement with the age is clear, and a study of the issues, the characters, the themes and the language used in his fiction shows that they are typical representatives of the ramified plight of modern man. This dilemma of the modern man in the 20th century is multi-

dimensional and kaleidoscopic: social, religious, moral and political. All these aspects are interrelated one way or another. They recur as literary motifs throughout Joyce's literary production and most prominently in the works selected in this study. What emphasizes this idea of man's dilemma is the fact that modern protagonists, as portrayed in Joyce's fiction, share the common predicament of having found themselves alienated, facing alone the reality of their lives, undergoing spiritual and moral crises. The root of modern man's isolation, for instance, can be sought in part in the process of sacrilegiousness and dissociation brought in by the domineering philosophies of that time. It is this basic process of sacrilegiousness that found its source in Nietzsche's blasphemous call of the "Death of God":

The profanization of life in our period surpasses and extends the mere collapse of formal theistic religion... This is a kind of total secularization of consciousness that in its deepest aspect entails not so much the loss of God: what is basically lost is the sacred and the great impoverishment of the human spirit consists in the death of all awareness of any animating power or presence amid and within the familiar realities of nature and history.³

Another fundamental cause of the rise of this kind of dilemma may also be traced to the tremendous influence of science and the emergence of what is probably called "technological alienation". Many critics attribute the process of sacrilegiousness itself to that kind of alienation. Heinemann connects the modern sense of alienation with "the Industrial Revolution and the collectivizing trend bound up with machine production."⁴ Thus, in many modern novels, social isolation is basically expressed through the confrontation between the protagonists' subjective views and values and the outer reality of the objective world around them. These new social and moral diseases: the sense of alienation, the quest for selfhood, and spiritual and moral ordeal have all become features of the 20th century modern literature including Joyce's fiction. These are to be considered thoroughly through examining the selected novels of Joyce.