

ISSN 0976-8165

The Criterion



The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Quarterly Refereed & Indexed Open Access Journal

April 2013 Vol. 4 Issue- II

Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com
criterionejournal@gmail.com

Desires and Exiles in James Joyce's *Exiles*

Tanmay Chatterjee
Research Scholar
Department of English
Banaras Hindu University
Varanasi – 221005, U.P., India.

Abstract:

Exiles (1918) is the only existing play by James Joyce. He wrote this play while finishing his first novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), and beginning work on *Ulysses* (1922). Joyce was much influenced by the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, and *Exiles*, in many respects, echoes the themes and characters of Ibsen's last play, *When We Dead Awaken*. Described by Joyce as “three cat and mouse acts,” *Exiles* follows a group of individuals who are struggling with idealistic principles that are at war with their own passions and desires. The conflicts that surround each character's view of freedom, how each chooses to exert their free will, and the expectations that the characters have of each other creates confusion for all of them about their principles, desires, and intellect. The pervasive theme of this play is exile—man exiled from man, man exiled from woman, man exiled from society, and man exiled from his heart's desires. All the major characters in this play are exiles in their own ways. *Exiles* also provides a thoughtful reader with a meaningful explanation for Joyce's self-imposed exile from his native land. The present paper attempts to explore the desires of the principal characters and elucidate the theme of exile in *Exiles*.

Key Words: Ibsen, desires, exile, conflicts, freedom, free will, principles, society.

Critics have called Joyce's *Exiles* nasty, incomprehensible, confusing and confused, a sad anti-climax. It certainly does not make for easy or pleasant reading; on the page it is overwhelmingly cerebral and narrow, and over-mechanical in the contrivances by which the four (or three-and-a-half) main characters are always presented in twos, engaged in soul-searching dialogues in which they seem to succeed only in mystifying each other as well as the reader.

But in the theatre *Exiles* have a deep and reverberant effect. Richard Rowan, the returned exile, is a curiously obsessive figure; his powerful, passionate mind is shown seeking to carry its search for freedom into new territories of feeling, and though we may finally think him mad, we have learnt to sympathise with him, and to feel sorry for the simple, warm, innocent Bertha whom he torments even more than he torments himself. In this respect the play is intensely absorbing, and deeply satisfying, as those who saw the Royal Shakespeare Company's production in London in 1971 will witness. The producer was Harold Pinter, who induced on the stage a menacing atmosphere of psychological claustrophobia such as that which characterizes some of his own plays.

Again, the play draws on Joyce's own experience. Clearly the returned exiles are Joyce himself and his wife Nora, already delineated in the 'country-cute' Gretta Conroy of “The Dead”. Little Archie, their eleven-year-old son, calls his father *babbo*, as Giorgio Joyce did, and delights in going off to ride with the milkman as young Stephen did in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (63). There are several of these

minor correspondences; what is more important is that Joyce is externalising in Richard his own psychological hang-ups.

Richard and Bertha Rowan have returned to Dublin from twelve years of exile, during which Richard, a philosopher and writer, has acquired enough reputation to make him a strong candidate for a chair at the University. He is welcomed back by his old friend and intellectual sparring partner Robert Hand, who has degenerated into a journalist and man of the world, a frankly hedonistic bon-vivant and lady-killer. Robert not only writes eulogies of Richard in the Irish press, not only fixes the academic appointment, but makes passes at Bertha, who naturally and unself-consciously enjoy his attentions. The question appears to be whether Robert will succeed in getting Bertha into bed with him; a conventional dramatic triangle, perhaps with the position only slightly complicated by Robert's attractive and educated cousin Beatrice, with whom Richard has been conducting soulful correspondence during his absence, and who is obviously very much in love with him.

But the relationship of these people is by no means a conventional dramatic triangle or quadrilateral, because two of the people are not ordinary people—or at least they do not display the ordinary generalised emotions of popular domestic tragicomedy. Richard and Bertha have been living together as man and wife, yet have not married. In Richard's view, subjecting their love and devotion to an external authority, civil or religious, would have been sacrilege; to Bertha, love and motherhood are complete in themselves—like Molly Bloom in *Ulysses*, she is 'the earth, dark, formless mother, darkly conscious of her instincts', as the author himself says in the notes he wrote for the play (153). The intense desire of Richard is expressed in his last speech: "To hold you by no bonds, even of love, to be united with your body and soul in utter nakedness." This renunciation of 'bonds' makes him also renounce the usual moral sanctions of husband (though he is not technically a husband) against adulterer. He wants to try Bertha in the fire of Robert's commonplace passion. He deliberately encourages her to go to him in his conventional love-nest, with its perfume spray and its pink-shaded lights; he again and again makes it clear to her that she has complete freedom to surrender to her natural desires for Robert is an attractive and skilful wooer, and knows how to soothe and flatter her.

To Robert, love means above all else sexual attraction; it is consummated in physical union (78). To Richard, it is a union of souls. As Joyce says in his notes: The soul like the body may have a virginity. For the woman to yield it or for the man to take it is the act of love. Love . . . is in fact so unnatural a phenomenon that it can scarcely repeat itself, the soul being unable to become virgin again. . . . (149)

"Three cat and mouse acts" was how Joyce described the play and we presume that Bertha is the cat, yet she refutes our feline expectations; she is no Hedda Gabler, no schemer and she does not pitch one man against the other; rather she is credulous to the idea that she can bring them closer together. Her mind, as the author tells us, is 'like a sea mist'. She is a woman stripped naked by the machinations of both men. In his notes for the play, Joyce wishes for her eventual independence, that being the singular route to her "own soul's solitude". Perhaps she senses that she is powerless to assuage them or even uncover their knotted relationship. While their battle may be centred on her, it is rooted in something deeper, the hidden nugget that by possessing the same woman, they will somehow arrive at carnal knowledge of one another.

It seems that in spite of Bertha's utter surrender to him, even to the extent of accepting his unconventional refusal to set the seal of 'respectability' on the union,

Richard is tortured by doubts as to whether Bertha's soul has truly yielded its virginity to him; and by the end of the play it is clear that he never will cease to torture himself: RICHARD (*still gazing at her and speaking as if to an absent person*): I have wounded my soul for you – a deep wound of doubt which can never be healed. (148)

Nobody but a saint or a simpleton could live with such a man; and Bertha is something of both. She is armoured with a proud integrity that is only momentarily pierced by jealousy of the girl who is Richard's intellectual and aesthetic inspiration, Beatrice, who is his Muse as her namesake was Dante's. Bertha's integrity is not compromised by her feelings of affection and gratitude to Robert, the seducer bringing gifts symbolised by the red roses (25), like Blazes Boylan with his red carnation in *Ulysses*, 'The toff with a flower in his mouth,' and one feels it would not be compromised even if she did go to bed with him. As a matter of fact, Joyce does not tell whether she did or not.

Beatrice is also an unfortunate character. She is, to Richard, only a half-being, an intellectual attraction coupled to a physical repulsion. Richard is content to have her as an intellectual companion, another friend. Her role was to be the intellectual side of Bertha's personality, but she fails him since she is unable to keep the relationship on an intellectual basis. It is Bertha, not Richard, who establishes a rapport with Beatrice at the end (Clark 78).

The character of Richard can be understood only in terms of morbid psychology; he is a sick man; his wound will never heal. Like Bloom, he is a masochist. This is first revealed by his intense detailed cross-examination of Bertha (56-60). He himself tells Robert that he longed to be betrayed by him and Bertha as he wants to be delivered from all the laws and chains of convention (87). He also describes how in their early years he had once woken Bertha to tell her of his own betrayal of her with a prostitute: "She must know me as I am" (83). He puts into practice the maxim '*Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner*', but in an inverted sense; he takes it to mean that one can't forgive *unless* one knows everything, that total confession is a necessity. Here one is reminded of the stark truth of *Dubliners* (Grose 19).

This behavior is, then, abnormally masochistic; it is not presented in a comic way, as later it is worked into *Ulysses*. The play is no more a comedy than *Hedda Gabler* or *When We Dead Awaken*, those Ibsen naturalistic dramas with which it has such close affinities. It is hard to find a laugh, or even a smile, in it. The series of face-to-face interviews is deadly serious; even the little boy Archie, who might have brought a ray of archly sentimental sunshine, is used as a missile.

Like the master Ibsen's plays, *Exiles* has its symbols; I have already mentioned the roses, out of which a good deal of mileage is extracted. There is also the smooth, cool unimpressionable solipsistic stone (47), which appears to stand for woman as a sex object. ["Do you think I am a stone?" cries Bertha (130).] The rain that falls reminds us of the rain that falls on Ragoon (Grose 23), or the snow at the end of "The Dead" (*Dubliners* 160). But what is the significance of the 'fresh Dublin Bay herrings', cried offstage by a fish-woman at the climax of Act III (139)? Is there some subtle hint at the early Christian fish symbol, linking Bertha or Richard with Christ as a sacrificial figure? Or is it merely an irrelevant naturalistic detail in the manner of Chekhov? Whatever it signifies, it is not made explicit; and this may be regarded as a blemish, since it does not illuminate the action as a dramatic symbol should.

The title *Exiles* is in itself a verbal symbol. Of course, Richard and Bertha are returned exiles, and one part of the message of the play is that Ireland cannot easily

welcome back those who have felt their intellectual and artistic freedom cannot flourish in Dublin's atmosphere of literary, ecclesiastical and political bigotry. Robert, the skilful journalist accustomed to sounding public opinion, give expression to the general feelings of Dublin people towards Richard in his article (129). There can be little doubt that Joyce meant the words to apply to his own case, especially as they are adapted from a review of *Chamber Music* by one of own old friends, Thomas Kettle. In sending Richard home he is fulfilling in fiction his own frustrated wish; for Joyce was never to live in Ireland, never to be acclaimed as the creator of his country's conscience, never to be appointed to a professorship; and when he was famous he refused the honour of membership of the Irish Academy.

But Richard and Bertha are exiles in a deeper sense. They are exiled, through Richard's intransigent idealism, from the comfortable conventions that make life bearable for ordinary mortals. Where the rules of conduct have daily to be forged anew in soul-searching and soul-searing encounters, men and women are frighteningly alone. Surrounding society speaks as strange a language as any foreign tongue. Although Joyce suggests in his notes that Richard and Bertha might go into exile (157), it is the frightening isolation of Richard and Bertha that is the keynote of the play's final cadence.

What then remains the dominant impression after 'three cat and mouse acts' (157)? First, a feeling of frustration in that the reader does not know the answer to two or three problems that the play has been propounding. Did Bertha and Robert commit adultery? Would it have pleased or enraged Richard if he knew that they had? Had the bizarre notion, implicit in Bertha's actions and made explicit in the notes, that she might reconcile the two men through her body, not just through normal friendship, ever any chance of succeeding? Does Robert go away into exile, as he intended, or does Richard take Bertha into exile again, having refused or not been given his chair in the University?

Possibly Joyce would have regarded these questions as naive. None of his books reaches a tidy conclusion. A more positive impression we are left with is that of a powerful emotional personality in Richard Rowan, a man tormented by the inability of body to live up to the highest aspirations of soul. For him, the flesh is indeed weak. He cannot console himself, as Donne does in "The Ecstasie", by recognising the paramount necessity for the existence of the body as a vehicle for the soul to express and communicate its motions:

So must pure lovers soules descend
T' affections, and to faculties,
Which sense may reach and apprehend,
Else a great Prince in prison lies.
T' our bodies turne wee then, that so
Weake men on love reveal'd may looker;
Loves mysteries in soules doe grow,
But yet the body is his booke.

John Donne: "The Ecstasie"

It is no wonder, then, that Ezra Pound, on reading the play, pronounced it unfit for the stage. He didn't believe an audience could follow it or take it in, even if anyone were bold enough to stage it in 'our chaste and castrated English-speaking world'. Anything requiring thought, said Pound, could not appeal to the mass. There can be no doubt that *Exiles* will never appeal to the mass: what great drama does? But audiences

have grown up since his day; people who can take Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter find little difficulty in understanding *Exiles*; and to see it well performed, or to hear it on the radio, for which it is peculiarly well suited, is to undergo an absorbing experience.

In general critics of Joyce regrettably have not examined *Exiles* as a reflection of Joyce himself and have tended to ignore or subordinate it as a commentary on Joyce's biography. But *Exiles* gives to the careful reader a deep insight into the problem of Joyce's philosophy, providing an answer to the fact of his long exile more meaningful than any verbiage about the nature of the artist and his need for seclusion. Joyce was in a terrible position. His personality was such that it was repulsed by the teaching of his mother and the Jesuits, but he was unable to extricate himself completely from their influences. Thus his life was a series of paradoxes, which makes of Joyce a figure of tragic interest. His self-imposed exile takes on greater meaning, for in his flight he sought escape from his background and in a sense, from himself. But escape was a sham, a facade. Deep down he was a turmoil of doubts and confusions painted so movingly in the character of Richard Rowan. A return to Ireland and the seat of his tradition brought Rowan's ideational collapse. A similar return by Joyce had to be avoided—and was avoided. His life was spent wandering about Europe while his heart remained in Dublin through the medium of old news papers, handbills, posters and program. Like Ibsen, his love for his homeland was deep-seated even though the mystery of his temperament denied him rest in his native land. Some fail to grasp the paradox of Joyce. But the riddle begins to disappear in the light of Richard Rowan. Joyce fled Dublin to flee reality and himself. His failure to do so is the story of *Exiles*, a play of great importance as a testimony of the futile quest of its creator.

Works Cited:

- Clark, Earl John. "James Joyce's *Exiles*." *James Joyce Quarterly* 6.1 (1968): 69-78. JSTOR. Web. 14 March 2013.
- Donne, John. *Poems of John Donne*. Vol. I. E.K. Chambers ed. London: Lawrence & Bullen, 1896. Print.
- Grose, Kenneth, ed. *James Joyce: Literature in Perspective*. London: Evans Brothers Ltd., 1975. Print.
- Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 2001. Print.
- . *Chamber Music*. William York Tindall ed. New York: Octagon Books, 1954. Print.
- . *Dubliners*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 2001. Print.
- . *Exiles*. London: NEL Signet Modern Classics, 1968. Print.
- . *Ulysses*. London: Bodley Head, 2008. Print.