

Twentieth-Century Fiction
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Lecture - 39
Ulysses - Part 1

So, hello and welcome to this NPTEL course entitled Twentieth Century Fiction. We will start with a new text today, James Joyce's Ulysses. We just finished Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf, and we will see how this particular novel also corresponds to Mrs. Dalloway in very similar stylistic ways.

But before we dive into the text which we will obviously in due course, we will spend some time and this lecture we will be spend entirely in terms of looking at some of the features of the modernist fiction. We have done a fair bit of modernist fiction by now we have done Heart of Darkness, we have done Eliot's early poetry, we have done the Wasteland, we have done the you know the short story by Joyce Araby and of course, we have done Mrs Dalloway.

So, I think most of us have a fair idea of how the narrative techniques in high modernist writing operates. But you know Ulysses being one of the cult works of modernism, it is one of the most representative text of modernism, so I think it is worthwhile to spend a little bit of time, maybe a session which is what we are going to do now, talking about how the entire modernist narrative experiments are constructed and designed.

Now, one thing which we find; sort of a recursive feature in modernism, or modernist writing, high modernist writing is the entire technique of stream of consciousness. What is stream of consciousness? Now, obviously it means quite literally the way the thought processes work in the mind, right. So, the way thoughts associate you know one to each other and form an entire chain of associations which is sometimes logical, sometimes rational, and sometimes affective in quality, a f f e c t i v e.

So, some of them, some of the stream of consciousness technique operates by affective association principles, right. So, one thought latches on to another thought is some kind of a chain of affect, and that is how the entire stream of consciousness you know operates.

Now, to put that into writing that is obviously a very you know difficult thing, it is a very complex thing because you know the entire thought processes as you know, those of us I mean we experience it almost every day. When we think of different things together, as some kind of a chain, we find that sometimes there is no causal connect between thought a and thought b. So, thought a can end in the middle of you know the narrative and then latch itself onto a new thought which might come as a trigger.

So, you might see something around you which might trigger you, to think about certain things, and then you have a different trigger which takes you to different kind of thoughts. So, in a way it is all connective, at the same time they do not quite causally connected, there is no neat cause and effect relationship between thought processes and that is how we experience the entire experience of thinking every day.

Now, modernism is one of the earliest, probably the first literary movement which really wanted to systematize human thought processes into language, right. So, obviously we have had different writings, of different eras of time where you know the focus has been the human mind, the human thought process, human memory etcetera, but you find this becomes almost an obsession with modernist writing, this becomes almost a system of writing in modernism where to depict how the human brain thinks, how the human mind thinks becomes, you know it almost becomes the central theme of modernist writings, right.

So, sometimes you find that the story gets buried under the thought processes or the entire fluorescence of thought, right. So, the fluidity of thought, the flow of thought, the entire flood of thought processes that becomes a story essentially. So, it is not really story it you know beneath the thought processes and then when you come to Ulysses you find that to be a spectacular example of that.

I mean, it is not a lot of things which happen in Ulysses, it is just about one day in Dublin. Just like Mrs Dalloway was about one day in London and despite that you know we have this one calendar day, one historical day, one stretch of clock time, but you know inside the stretch of clock time, inside the window of clock time, you know inside that parameter of one calendar day we have multiple narratives and operation and sometimes in conflict sometimes connected to each other through different nodal points.

And the nodal points could be characters. So, character and narrative a, can also be character narrative b. The nodal points can also be spaces. So, one narrative can intersect another narrative in certain space, and that is why the metropolis is such a fascinating example of this kind of such a handy site, for this kind of a narrative technique because the metropolis offers all these different channels of intersection. We think about any metropolis, whether it is London or Dublin or you know Mumbai or Calcutta or Madras, we find that each metropolis has different nodal points, different intersections, different places where people come in and intersect and go away to different directions.

So, these nodal points are very much a spatial entity, a real spatial presence in any metropolis. So, the city becomes a very handy site for this kind of modernist technique of stream of consciousness and hyperlink narratives, because the city offers the actual geographical, physical place where nodal points are necessary, where nodal points exist. So, characters in one point, characters in one story can very feasibly connect to characters in another story through different you know sites of intersection.

So, Ulysses offers such a fascinating example. I mean, it is quite possibly the most famous modernist novel, it is also quite infamous in its own day. It was banned for a long time in different parts of the world, especially in the America, in the United States of America where it was banned until the 1960s I think.

And the you know, the two main charges against this novel were its quite absurd when I think about it because the one charge was obscenity of course, I mean that would be a very commonplace charge against any book which is banned. It is supposed to be obscene, you know it is supposed to be profane, religiously profane, etcetera culturally profane, morally profane.

But the other charge was more interesting that charge was obscurity, right. So, obscurity obviously meant that it is difficult to read the book, it is obscure, I mean its meaning is not very clear. And that obviously makes it a bit of a paradox I mean if it is obscure you know how do you know that it is obscene, right.

So, in order to know it's obscene you must be able to read it, right. So, obscurity would actually undercut the entire claim of obscenity. But this is one of the novels which you know which produces paradoxes like this throughout history.

And you know Joyce at various points has told that, you know he wanted to put in so many riddles inside *Ulysses*, there are professors across the world, but you know struggle to decipher and decode the meanings, right. So, that would be like a he is sort of implanted different jokes in narrative in a way which is which would be almost difficult and impossible to decode.

Now, the obscurity, obscenity, paradox in *Ulysses*, it is just a pointer to some of the more important paradoxes in the novel because when you start reading the novel which you will in from the next session we find that you know this is a novel about one day as I mentioned this is a novel about very ordinary people. But as the very title suggests, *Ulysses* is obviously an epic you know, there is an epic structure, an epic sub structure or super structure whatever you call it, that a novel is very superficially adhering to.

So, it is also a journey novel, just like *Ulysses*, the original *Ulysses*, Homer's *Ulysses* was coming back from somewhere and his wife was having many suitors, his wife is having many visitors, many lovers and he was not aware of it and he was coming back, the entire story was about homecoming and Telemachus was obviously his son. So, we have a similar kind of a structure over here.

Leopold Bloom is the character, the protagonist in *Ulysses*. If we can call one person the protagonist, Molly Bloom is his wife and we have Stephen Dedalus. Those of you read *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by Joyce would know that that is a novel where he appears for the first time, and he is obviously a more grown man, he is obviously someone who wants to make it big as an artist, as a writer in Dublin. So, he becomes the quasi son like figure for Leopold Bloom. I mean Leopold and Molly Bloom they do not have any children on their own biologically speaking. So, you know Stephen Dedalus becomes the quasi son character, the quasi Telemachus character in this novel.

And it is interesting how the original *Ulysses'* journey across, the mighty seas across sirens and monsters and different kinds of storms and winds is replicated, at a very structural level by you know Leopold Bloom's travels across Dublin, the city of Dublin. And obviously there is no comparison to be made at all between the stormy seas of the Homer's, the Homeric *Ulysses* and the very very messy and dirty streets and lanes of Dublin, that Leopold Bloom habits.

But that is precisely the point. You know this is what Eliot had described as Joyce's mythic method, in the sense that the mythic method is the way a technique where a certain myth is used, structurally speaking and then a story sort of seems to conform to that mythical structure, but obviously in a very different setting, obviously with very different characters, with very different sentiments, right. And often times the mythic method may be used to flatten out, there are certain grand narratives about homecoming, flatten out certain grand narratives about nostalgia, about nation, about love etcetera.

So, mythic method by *Ulysses* by Joyce in *Ulysses* more often than not, it becomes a technique through which the grandiose character of the original myth is flattened, is deflated; the significance - the mythic significance is deflated in this particular novel, right. So, the mythic method is a structural replication of an original mythical journey, of an original mythical action which is replicated at a very superficial structural level.

But beneath these structural superficial adherents there is very little that is carried over, or in resonance in terms of sentiments. And the sentiments if they are similar at all, similar sentiments with the original myth, at the sentiments in this new text, more often than not turn out to be more cynical, turn out to be more exhausted, turn out to be more flattened, turn out to be more deflated in quality, right. So, there is a degree of deflation in mythic method especially in a way that Joyce uses it.

So, one could say that you know *Ulysses* by James Joyce can be seen as a mimicry of the Homeric odyssey, it is very shallow mimicry. So, in that sense it is quite postmodern in quality. And it is one of those novels which is obviously it is very modernist in quality in terms of stream of consciousness, in terms of the use of space and time, in terms of the interiorities, everyone is talking about emotions, and thoughts, and memory, and inwardness and interiority in that sense. But also, it is quite a postmodern in its centerless-ness or rather in its celebration of centerless-ness. So, it does not really mourn centerless-ness. It actually celebrates centerless-ness.

And if we come to a later work by Joyce which is *Finnegan's Wake*, we find that is entirely postmodernist in quality in the sense that it is entirely anarchic, it becomes a text of bliss as Roland Barthes would call it a writerly text, a text which is open for interpretations, a text which you know which cannot be read as a reader which cannot be

consumed as a reader which can also be participated in as a writer, right. That is the distinction that Roland Barthes had made between the readerly texts and writerly text.

Readerly text is something which you can read as a reader, it has got a closed quality, hence it is readerly in quality, it is called readerly in that sense. Writerly text on the other hand is something which you can only participate as a co-writer, something that you could be you know be an active creator, co-creator, even when you are reading it.

Now, *Finnegan's Wake* is entirely that. Now, *Ulysses* shows signs of such postmodern experimentation with language. We have entire passages which are completely onomatopoeic in quality. It's just sounds, different sounds put together without any meaning whatsoever.

But what those passages do in a very interesting sense is that it gives *Ulysses* a sense of immediacy. So, it becomes very automatic in some sense, it becomes very immediate in some sense, and it becomes very immediate capture of reality. So, the different sections in a novel where we have tramcars coming in and going. So, the tramcars of Dublin, coming in, screeching in and going, and instead of describing the tramcars we have sections which just mention the sounds of tramcars, screeching sounds of tramcars, halting sounds of tramcars, the ugly sounds of tramcars, the sonorous sounds of tramcars, right. So, that obviously gives a more authentic depiction of tramcars' movements in Dublin.

So, in that sense it becomes a very automatic text, it becomes very immediate text, it becomes very immediate capture of reality, a capture of consciousness so to speak, which is the other point that I wanted to come to the whole idea of consciousness. So, how is consciousness represented in *Ulysses*? And obviously consciousness is a very fluid phenomenon. It is not really a straight take or monolithic concept, it is not something which is passively consuming, reality around it. Consciousness on the other hand in Dublin and in Joyce *Ulysses* is very much an active process, it is the process of becoming, unbecoming and rebecoming.

It is a very fluid phenomenon, consciousness, rather than a static category which has just some investments in meaning. So, we find the different characters in *Ulysses* you know whether it is Leopold Bloom or Molly Bloom or Stephen Dedalus, so different, other characters, who come and go, the minor character, the major characters and of course,

Dublin itself becomes a character, the city itself becomes very important character, very significant character in this novel as it was in the case of *Araby* which is a story we read from *Dubliners*.

We find that each of these characters, they are they always foreground their consciousness, they always foreground their thought processes, right and thought process become very very important in that sense because it is not so much about the action, it is not so much of a moving from point a to point b. It is about the interiority of movements, it is about the entire depth additional dimension, the third dimension; in movement rather than just a lateral dimension from point a to point b. So, in that sense *Ulysses* is not really a novel about action, it is a novel about different kinds of thought processes which in turn becomes action.

So, in a sense it is like it is like an X-ray of human consciousness, where it basically foregrounds what is supposed to be inside right the inside being the interiority of the human mind, interiority of the human consciousness, the interiority of the human memory processes, all those processes, all those methods are now externalized in *Ulysses* and that becomes the character, that becomes the landscape, the tabula rasa of the novel so to speak.

So, the two different landscapes are played with each other. There is Dublin, there is a real landscape, the real geographical landscape in *Ulysses*. There is also the different minds of the characters which form a landscape because they are constantly foregrounded in a way that becomes very external and exteriority. So, you know this entire externalization of interiority is something which makes the landscape very very mental in quality, very psychological in quality, right.

So, you might say it is a mindscape. So, the mindscape of the different characters which is a stream, stream as well as a string of consciousness is a very close correspondence to the landscape of Dublin, the very dingy messy, mutable landscape of Dublin. And that brings us to the other point of mutability in this story.

We find this is a story about changes happening all the time. Changes in thought processes, changes in memory, changes in sentiments, changes in bodily functions, we have lots of bodily functions in *Ulysses*, there is a lot of defecation happening in *Ulysses*, we have Leopold Bloom defecating in the very beginning of the novel, there is a lot of

description of digestion, indigestion, consumption of fear and of course, defecation. So, it becomes and this is part of the scandal that it generated in that point of time, in sense it foregrounded the internal bodily function.

And it was not trying to sublimate the body into a romantic category, it was trying to give a very earthly description on the body, the body as a very earthly activity the body as activity, the body as a fluid phenomenon. Again, like consciousness, a very fluid phenomenon something which you know consumes, digests you know has indigestion something which you know defecates. So, all these become, all these activities become very much part of the central story of Ulysses, the different bodily functions, you know which was as I mentioned part of the scandal of Ulysses as well.

So, the human body in Ulysses becomes a very much a volatile phenomenon, a mutable phenomenon, like the mutable metropolis. So, you find the human figures, the human body, the human activities, carnal activities you know, consumption activities all those become part of landscapers as well, all those becomes part of the story as well. So, in that sense Ulysses becomes very much a mutable volatile you know velocity driven narrative about human memory, consciousness and thought processes in a very messy and mutable Dublin.

So, in that sense it becomes very city story, a city which also becomes a character, characters which also become the city. So, in that sense space and human mind are blended into each other in very very complex and cognitive and organic ways in Ulysses. Which brings us to the other point of organicity. So, as I just mentioned lot of organic movements happen in Ulysses including sexual movements, digestive movements, defecation movements, and consuming movements, etcetera. But all these movements obviously they are normally classified as bawdy movements b a w d y; carnal you know something which is related to sexuality, consumption, something related to eating defecation something related to the you know the very very dirty filthy bodily functions.

And you find all these different movements are connected in a way which makes the entire landscape of Ulysses very very mutable in quality as I just mentioned. And mutability is a very very constant phenomenon of the metropolis and that obviously makes it very very organic which is the point that I am trying to stress over here.

So, the organicity of the city, and the organicity of the human movements are blended into each other in *Ulysses* to create this almost carnivalesque landscape of organs, of organic activities, of organic waste. And waste is obviously a very important function in *Ulysses*. We have a lot of litter in *Ulysses*, lot of waste products, human waste, organic waste, so we have a lot of food wasted, human bodily waste of course, which comes from defecation, litter in terms of using paper which is stale, using paper to do certain a very very you know earthly bodily, disgusting and filthy functions etcetera. So, filth and defecation and waste and trash, so all these come together, all these are foregrounded constantly in *Ulysses*.

You find that this is obviously a big scandal given the time in which this was written, this is very catholic Dublin, a very conservatively Catholic Dublin and obviously the religious hold on Dubliners was still quite strong. There was a lot of sexual morality at play, a lot of religious morality at play and we found that how that obviously created confusion in the minds of characters, in the minds of people who inhabited, the landscape as you saw in for instance in *Araby* the short story, where the boy who is obviously having a lot of very erotic impulses, a lot of sexual impulses towards Mangan's sister, but he cannot articulate it, he cannot bring himself to talk about it, he cannot bring himself to acknowledge it.

So, he wants to sublimate it into some kind of religious rhetoric of devotion and platonic worshipping which obviously is not the case. But when it comes to *Ulysses* we find that you know all these bodily, carnal, sexual, volatile functions are foregrounded in a way which becomes very very quote unquote 'immoral' in quality, right. So, that it completely undercuts any restrictions which is imposed on morality, religious morality, sexual morality, you know catholic morality, so all these are done away with entirely in *Ulysses*.

And as a result what we have is a very Carnavalesque quality of human bodily functions, organic functions, organicity, immediacy, automatism, all these become very importantly a very complexly blended to each other. So, the tramcars, the movement of tramcars blend with the movements of the human body, the rhythms of the city, blend with the rhythms of the human sexual impulses. So, all these different blending ins happen in different points of time in *Ulysses* which makes it such as an organic novel,

such an organically volatile and automatic and available and earthly and tangible novel in that sense.

As a result of which we find it so relevant even today because it talks about certain things that are very universal in quality, right. It talks about emotions, it talks about sentiments, it talks about you know bodily desires, it talks about bodily you know needs in that sense you know and all these are put together in a very realist way. So, in that sense *Ulysses* despite using stream of consciousness, despite using you know certain very experimental narrative techniques it is actually very very grounded in reality.

Now, which brings me to the final point of today with which I will come to an end in this lecture. Whenever we talk about a realism we have this assumption of realism being realistic, but of course nothing can be further from the truth because realism is a narrative device which you know which entails which presupposes an omniscient narrator, a narrator which knows everything, narrator who has a control of entire characters, entire action of the novel and a narrator who is telling you a very close narrative in a sense of being having this absolute knowledge of what is happening in the characters' minds, what is happening with the characters' lives, what is happening in the before now and after.

So, the omniscient narrator you know in realist novel, in realism driven novel, it has complete control, complete cognitive control over the temporality and the spatiality of the narrative in terms of knowing exactly what is happening in a spatial sequence, in terms of knowing exactly what is happening on a temporal sequence. But of course, we know that nothing can be further from the truth when it comes to real life because real life obviously is not predictable. In real life, obviously, we do not have any control in terms of space and time, space and time is always changing in real life and we have you know the entire beauty, and complexity, and tragedy of real life is this unpredictability in that sense.

So, in that sense the stream of consciousness technique or the technique that Joyce uses in *Ulysses* is entirely unpredictable, it actually foregrounds the unpredictability, the mutability of human mind, the mutability of human lives and, in that sense, it is actually more real, way more real than any realism driven narrative technique. And that is the one point that I wanted sort of foreground today in a sense of you know undercutting some of

the myths about realism. There is nothing real about realism at all. Realism is an artificial narrative technique which presupposes an omniscient narrator, who has complete control and complete knowledge over the time, space, before and after, with the entire activities in entire minds. So, all the characters in the novel.

In other words, a realist narrator or realism driven narrator is basically a god. It presupposes a god like presence. a godly and godlike presence over the narrative. Ulysses in that sense is a godless novel, because there is no control over the space and time. The human beings move in very mutable combinations, very complex combinations, very random combinations, they crisscross each other at different points of time, they have bodily needs, they have sexual needs, they have carnal needs, they have different kinds of appetites, and all these appetites are foregrounded in a way which makes it very very real in the sense of being bodily and automatic and lived.

So, in that sense Ulysses is about experientiality, it foregrounds, it celebrates experientiality in a sense of being you know human experiences you know the way it is experienced, the unpredictability of experience, the mutability of experience, the embodied quality of experience is what is celebrated and foregrounded over and over in Ulysses.

And so, that is the premise that is the stylistic thematic and narrative premise of Ulysses which I want to talk a little bit about today. And for the next class we will dive in to the text, obviously we cannot read it in its entirety for practical purposes, we will certainly we will select certain passages from the text which we will highlight and study in some details in due course of time. So, we will start with the text in the next lecture.

We end this lecture today. Hopefully, I have given you some background of the narrative technique, some background of the cultural condition, some background of the literary traditions which inform this great novel by James Joyce.

Thank you for your attention.