

Twentieth-Century Fiction
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Lecture – 44
Summary

So, hello and welcome to this NPTEL course entitled Twentieth Century Fiction. In this particular session, we will have a Summary lecture – essentially, we will be talking about some of the things which we have discussed. But, we will see how some of the themes of modernism, some of the recursive themes of twentieth century fiction can be seen and located in some of the texts that we have done so far.

So, the theme for today's lecture is epiphany, right. So, that is what we are going to talk about in some details. I did mention epiphany quite extensively while looking at Eliot's early poetry especially if you remember the section from the poem Preludes, where the fallen woman looks up at the ceiling to see how the images of her life flicker across the ceiling. The word flicker being very important because that is obviously, a cinematic metaphor that Eliot is using, flickering from some kind of a cinema machine as it were.

And, the whole idea of looking at something flickering across the ceiling as an example of an epiphany is interesting because if we push it back to Conrad which we did prior to Eliot if you look at Heart of Darkness, the epiphany in that particular novella is interesting as well because it is not an epiphany of enlightenment. It is just a reverse of that, is an epiphany of anti-illumination, an epiphany of darkness.

So, the knowledge that Marlow had gained from Heart of Darkness is a knowledge of nothingness and paradoxically that is the only knowledge which makes him privileged. So, that is the paradoxical condition that he inhabits and embodies. That, the knowledge of nothingness makes him privileged. So, when he comes back to the European space and wants to tell the story to European listeners, he cannot convey it fully and they do not get him fully. So, they remain sort of uninformed insiders of colonialism where he had actually seen and experienced it and seen the horror of it, but he cannot convey it back in a way which deserves you know a complete capture.

So, in that sense the epiphany in *Heart of Darkness* is one of darkness, is one of anti-illumination is one of nothingness, it is about the annihilation of the human subject and the dying words of Kurtz, “the horror the horror” is a statement of the annihilation. So, the finest specimen of Europe and if you remember the novel I mean the entire Europe went into the making of Kurtz. So, Kurtz is the European man the perfect European man who cracks up in the colonies and he becomes the native, he becomes a tyrant, he becomes just anti-civilization to the extent that you know the Europe, European machinery has to send someone to get rid of him. And, that is a very recurrent theme which has been played across many times in popular culture as well.

There are many films which have a similar theme the best European general goes to the colonial condition and turns native. He is a perfect assassin, he is a perfect machine, but he turns against the systems. So, the system has to send someone either to get rid of him or retrieve him. So, you can think of let us say *Dancing with the Wolves*, the Kevin Costner film and more famously *Apocalypse Now* which is loosely based on *Heart of Darkness* where Marlon Brando plays the role of Kurtz and someone is sent, someone is sent by the machinery to get rid of him.

So, the epiphany in *Heart of Darkness* is obviously, a very political experience right. So, it is a horror of imperialism that Marlow gleans from his experience and what he cannot convey back when he comes back to the colonies to the to the metropolis, to center, right.

Now, if we move on to Eliot we find that the epiphany becomes more and more machinic in quality. So, it has got words such as flicker and even before that if you look at the *Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, the entire procrastination in Prufrock is essentially a negotiation with epiphany right. So, the negotiation with epiphany is obviously, a neural experience, he is a nervous procrastinator. But, it is also an existential experience – it is something which affects him existentially it affects his self esteem in a social space right. So, epiphany in Prufrock becomes a negotiation with the external space.

And, if you remember the poem I am hoping you do the entire references to the mermaids in that poem where he comes keeps referring to the mermaids who may or may not sing to him you know that again becomes a negotiation with the epiphany because the mermaids inhabit the dreamscape where he has his illuminations, the

dreamscape where he seeks solace from the procrastinations of the external space. So, the in external space he suffered some experience of inadequate embodiment.

He cannot embody himself linguistically; he cannot embody himself sartorially; he cannot embody himself in the level of appearance because remember the lines the bald spot in the middle of his hair is seen by the ladies and is commented upon, his sleeves are inadequate as well. So, all these different markers of embodiment are insufficient in Prufrock. So, the only space in which he can potentially gain any experience or gain any sense of fulfillment is a dreamscape, which happens to be inhabited by mermaids in the case of the Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock. But, of course, the mermaids will not sing to him that is the recursive motif in the poem and he keeps saying that they will not sing to me.

So, again the epiphany in Prufrock is not about enlightenment it is not about fulfillment, but rather the opposite of that. It is about anti-fulfillment, it is about anti-enlightenment, it is about the experience and the recognition of horror; the recognition of nothingness, the knowledge of nothingness which annihilates him. But, the paradox of modernism or modernist literature is the knowledge of nothingness is what makes you a privileged human subject.

So, the only seer like quality available to the modern subject is possible through a negotiation with nothingness, through a knowledge of nothingness. You come back from an experience, you suffer an experience and that experience elevates you existentially despite the horror, despite the darkness right. So, that is the whole paradox of modernism. The epiphany in modernism is not about elevation, the epiphany in modernism is about enervation, is about exhaustion of the subject and paradoxically the exhaustion makes you a privileged subject.

And, we see a more medical example of that when we do Mrs. Dalloway which is the text which we will start off after this when the soldier comes back from the war he has seen the horrors of the war. So, he looks on the metropolis looks at the civilians getting on with their lives in the metropolis and he feels completely disconnected he has a cynical gaze, this alienated gaze because he had seen the horrors of war.

So, again the epiphany in Mrs. Dalloway is a medical condition where he has this PTSD the post traumatic stress disorder is informed by trauma. So, it actually becomes a darker

in Mrs. Dalloway epiphany is traumatic epiphany in Mrs. Dalloway. It is not quite so traumatic in the Eliot or Conrad, but it is definitely existentially deep and dark and that is something which is a recursive motif in modernism.

Now, if we go along with this and of course, I just mentioned the fallen woman in Preludes, the prostitute presumably who has this you know recognition of her life as being fragmented and horror-filled and something which is completely dark and alienated from any recognition of society, but that moment of epiphany is important because if you remember I did mention Henry Bergson in my references to the modernist epiphany and the whole idea the whole Bergsonian idea of clock time and real time. So, epiphany of course, takes place in real time or psychological time what Bergson had called *duree*, right whereas, clock time is temps or shared time something which is shared by everyone epiphany elevates you to a different temporal order.

So, in that sense epiphany is a spatiotemporal experience. It is a neural experience, it is an existential experience and in the case of modernism, it is profoundly political experience as well right. So, the whole spatio-temporality of epiphany is something which we must bear in mind very carefully when looking at the writings of Conrad or Eliot. Now, if you come to Joyce and one story we have done so far is Araby. The entire story of Araby is about the maturation of a human subject it is about an erotic experience which cannot be conveyed except in religious metaphors.

So, the entire linguistic landscape in this particular story is very confused because the boy is a catholic boy growing up in Dublin, a very decadent Dublin which the religion is very repressive there, the institutions are repressive, everything is anti-freedom, anti-fantasy, anti-imagination, anti-eros. In that kind of a landscape he finds his object of eros. I am using Freudian metaphors quite deliberately. The object of eros is Mangan's sister, it's someone who is not really named, but it's someone's sister that he desires. So, Mangan's sister becomes the object of eros, the destination of eros and we find the entire gaze that he has about Mangan's sister is a profoundly cinematic gaze.

So, again Joyce was very aware of the cinematic movements of his times and I did mention if you are interested in modernism's relationship with cinema, you can look up David Trotter's book *Modernism and Cinema* which has entire chapters on Joyce and

Eliot and Woolf which I find is very interesting for anyone interested in that subject or related areas of research.

Now, if you take a look at *Araby*, we find that a gaze in *Araby* the boy's gaze in *Araby* which is a maturing gaze - something which is getting sexually more mature, erotically more mature, imaginatively more mature that gaze is quite metonymic in quality. It has a cinematic quality of the close up of the long shot and it has also the cinematic quality of deceleration. It sort of slows down when it sort of lingers around certain objects. So, the petticoat in Mangan's sister, the borders and the railings, the photo play along her hair, the nape of her hair.

So, everything becomes very cinematic and very objectified in that way. So, in that sense it is an example of visual objectification what people like later film theorists would definitely classify that as an example of visual reification where the gaze is objectifying the seen subject and in that case in this particular case the seen subject is female. So, the female is essentially objectified, by this male erotic imagination which takes place entirely in the story *Araby*.

Now, if you take a look again, the problem with *Araby* or the complexity of *Araby* not the problem, the complexity of *Araby* is because it lies in the fact that the boy is very confused because he has these erotic embodied experiences, but he does not want to acknowledge his erotic content, his embodied content. He wants to sublimate it in some kind of a religious or knightly metaphor and hence all these metaphors about knight in shining armor, the metaphor of the chalice that he is protecting against the throng of foes.

So, all these metaphors all these markers of religious significance become very important in that story because he is trying to sublimate his erotic desire through the use of those selectively chosen metaphors which are religious and iconic in quality right. And of course, we see if you read between the lines if you take away the religious surface, you find this is actually about a very deep erotic experience that he is having difficulty to acknowledge as an adolescent boy who is religiously repressed in a very decadent Dublin.

Now, if you take a look at the epiphany in that short story because you know again at the end of the short story it is about disillusionment it is about a massive and colossal disappointment because the entire idea of *Araby* had become this exotic space for the

boy and we have seen how the signifiers of desire, the signifiers, the destinations of desire had kept shifting in the story from Mangan's sister it is shifted to Araby, the fairytale fairground as it were, where different parts of the orient are brought in.

So, again this is a very white male imagination trying to consume this idea of the exotic orient right. So, the Araby the very name Araby which is a sort of a reference to Arabia, so, you know the whole idea of Araby becomes exotic fair space for the boy where he can go and get something desirable for his lady love. So, again the knightly narrative is very important and it is very deliberately played up over and over again to sublimate his desire.

So, you know the attempt on the part of the boy is to tell you this is not about a local story in Dublin about a boy falling in love with a girl, it is something more significant. It is about a knight falling in love with the beloved and hence the religious markers are so important. So, it is a deliberate linguistic strategy on the part of the narrator which we have dealt with some details when we read the story.

Now, the question of epiphany becomes very important in that story because when he goes to Araby in the end he is obviously, completely disappointed and you find how the disappointment is conveyed to us through very subtle markers. The English accent for instance, that he gets that he listens to where the one woman was flirting with two men and he noticed the English accent which further alienates him as a Dubliner, as an Irishman and of course, there is a colonial subtext at play over here as well. The Dubliner going to the exotic space and feeling alienated and underprivileged because of the English accent around him and that is something he cannot negotiate with and there's couple of words which are very important in this context as well.

So, when the two men flirt with a woman they keep telling her she had said something and she keeps denying it. And, then a word fib is used; she said that is a fib and a word fib is very important because a fib is not really a lie, a fib is a trivial, a flippant lie. So, the word what the word fib does, it prepares you for the negative epiphany in the end, it prepares you for the completely flattening experience in the end right. It is not really a lie, it is not even a lie, it is a flippant lie. So, that is Joyce telling you what is about to happen. It is completely flattening out of any significance, it is complete deflation of an indignity that the boy is about to suffer.

So, the woman says fib - it is not a lie. So, Araby in the end turns out to be a fib. It is a very flippant lie, it is not really a profound lie, it is something related to something similar to the romantic idea of imagination and fantasy; a fantasy being a more degenerated form of imagination. So, something similar is happening here as well through the use of the word fib that Joyce is giving us right. And, the final image of Araby, if you remember when a boy says looking up in the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity and my eyes burned with anguish and anger.

So, again it is very cinematic like Eliot's prostitute is looking up at this massively closed fair space which now becomes in a sense a cinema hall while he sees himself in a magnified version of himself as a creature driven and derided by vanity. So, he sees his vanity played out on a big screen in Araby. So, Araby in a way ends up being a cinema hall for him where he sees himself his shame spectacularly played out in a darkened space. And, he sees himself as a creature driven and derided by vanity and my eyes burned with anguish and anger.

So, it has a purgation quality about it instead of all these vanities getting burnt away and with the vanity what gets burned away is his entire knightly narrative, the knight in shining armour narrative which gets burnt away in the end. So, again the epiphany is one of decadence, the epiphany is one of degeneration, it is not really an elevating epiphany. It is something which shames him; it is something which gives him a notion of his nothingness. But, again like Eliot's prostitute, like Prufrock, this sense of nothingness is what actually matures him paradoxically.

So, again we have a recursive marker of epiphany coming back in Joyce as well. Epiphany does not elevate you, it actually extinguishes you. But, this enervation or this sense of being extinguished is actually what makes you a privileged subject, it is actually what makes you a seer right. So, you can only see if you get blinded and we talked about this blindness and insight entanglement in Eliot's Wasteland as well especially with the figure of the Tiresias you can only be only have an insight if you go physically blind. So, blindness and insight play up with each other and there is a lot of good work done if you are interested I am happy to upload some content about this.

So, Tiresias is essentially is a camera gaze in wasteland and very symbolically he is blind. So, the insight that he has, has a price and that price is blindness. So, again we

have a similar kind of motif played out in Joyce as well. So, the epiphany he gets in the end must extinguish him as the romantic, erotic subject and that is the whole point of being derided by vanity. So, you know I saw a creature, I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity. I had a full notion a full spectacle of how vain I was, how filled with vanity I was and that obviously, you know ashamed him right. So, shames him.

So, the sense of shame is very important, it is spectacularly played out and that therein lies the epiphany; like Conrad's Marlow, like Conrad's Kurtz the epiphany lies in the horror – it's not really elevating, it's not really existentially transporting to a superior category of existence that actually brings you down to a more negative state of being to a more annihilated state of being which paradoxically makes him more matured subject of modernity.

So, I just wanted to summarize the notion of epiphany using some of the texts we have done so far. With that notion in mind, with that understanding in mind hopefully this has been a fruitful session for you. We will move on to a more medical understanding of epiphany which we will see in Mrs. Dalloway we have a traumatic victim coming back from the war. In all this epiphany is filled with trauma informed by trauma which he had picked up from the war and how each epiphany which makes him a superior subject comes at the cost of not just his existential enervation, but also his medical and biological enervation, he is essentially a dying man right, he is essentially a traumatophilic man. So, he is someone who is almost fixated to his trauma he cannot move on from the trauma and that trauma is a price he has to pay for his insight.

So, Septimus Smith in Mrs. Dalloway has his insight from the war, but the price he has to pay for the insight is essentially not just existential enervation, but also biological enervation. He comes to an end at the end he kills himself in the novel and that is something which we will pay some very close attention, through a very close reading of the text in due course of time. So, we move on to Mrs. Dalloway in the next lecture.

Thank you for your attention.