

**Ernest Hemingway and James Joyce: a brief analysis of the modernist traits in their short stories/ *Ernest Hemingway e James Joyce: uma breve análise de traços modernistas em seus contos***

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper brings a brief analysis of the English works: “Hills like white elephants” (1927) and “One reader writes” (1933) by Ernest Hemingway and “The sisters” (1914) by James Joyce, in order to illustrate the features that emerged with the modernist movement, considering changes related to the ways of making literature. To this end, this work provides a close reading of the three short stories bearing in mind the relation between fact and fiction and how fiction depicts social, historical, and/or political facts. Hemingway’s texts and Joyce’s “The sisters” are powerful examples of the literary changes raised by modernism. The works of both writers are only the tip of the iceberg to provoke a reflection in the reader about the changes in the ways of making literature and how language is used in order to depict social events through fiction.

**KEYWORDS:** Modernism. Fiction. Short Stories. Hemingway. Joyce.

**RESUMO**

*Este artigo apresenta brevemente a análise das obras inglesas: “Hills like white elephants” (1927) e “One reader writes” (1933) de Ernest Hemingway e “The sisters” (1914) de James Joyce, a fim de ilustrar as características que emergiram com o movimento modernista no que concerne às mudanças relativas aos modos de fazer literatura. Para tanto, este trabalho fornece uma leitura atenta dos três contos, considerando a relação entre fato e ficção e como a ficção retrata fatos sociais, históricos e políticos. Os textos de Hemingway e Joyce são exemplos potentes das mudanças literárias emergidas pelo modernismo. Os trabalhos de ambos os escritores são apenas a ponta do iceberg para provocar no/a leitor/a uma reflexão acerca das mudanças nos modos de fazer literatura e como a linguagem é usada a fim de retratar eventos sociais por meio da ficção.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Modernismo. Ficção. Contos. Hemingway. Joyce.

## **1 Introduction: modern fiction**

When we think about literature, more specifically fiction, we very often think about a made up story. Indeed, “fiction is a made up story”, as Scholes (1991, p. 121) points out. However, it does not mean that fiction lacks fact. Actually, both are linked. They are not opposite, but complementary. We understand that fact is what happens in society, what is linked to truth and reality, whereas fiction is a made up thing, an unreal thing, something linked to falsehood.

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This link between fact and fiction is named by Linda Hutcheon (2001) as “historiographic metafiction”. A story of fiction that depicts social, historical, and/or political facts. Thus, literature has depicted the *zeitgeist* in which it is produced. Although Hutcheon had used this term to deal with postmodernism, we can also apply it to modernism, once this movement had already made a different use of language to depict facts.

According to Scholes, a way of reading fiction – literature – is identifying and understanding some elements presented in the story, namely plot, character, setting, point of view, and meaning. The reader can identify and separate these elements to understand the story. Generally, these stories present a linear plot, with characters controlled by a traditional narrator that uses his/her strategies – point of view – to guide the reader in a defined setting, and to build meaning. This structural model of reading fiction is also presented by Brooks and Warren in *Understanding fiction* (1979) and named by them and Hutcheon as “cause-effect”. The story presents a beginning with an exposition, a middle with a problem and climax, and an end with a denouement, a solution.

However, in modern fiction, these elements are blurred and it is not possible to separate them. There is no friendly narrator to guide the reader, but a narrator to disorient him/her. The focus is to provoke discomfort and reflection about historical, social and political events through fiction. Considering these changes related to the modernism in the ways of making literature, this paper brings a brief analysis of the English works: “Hills like white elephants” and “One reader writes” by Ernest Hemingway and “The sisters” by James Joyce, in order to illustrate the features that emerged with this movement, once these works are powerful examples of the literary changes raised by modernism, and both authors are pioneers of this movement.

Although we may, sometimes, rely on general descriptions of what modern fiction is, that is, what is no longer present as the compounding elements of fiction or the new elements that were added, describing what modernism in literature is has proved to be far more challenging. Such difficulty in terms of definition has its roots not only in the changes that society went through from the beginning of the twentieth century on, but also in the plurality of different reactions to those changes.

As Brooks and Warren (1979) mention, fiction changes as well as the world changes. Until the nineteenth century, novels, in general, for instance, depicted life, but they depicted an ideological life. That is why Scholes (1991) mentions fiction as an escape of reality. From the twentieth century on, with the changes in the world, the way of making and reading

literature has changed and we have different forms and contents. The content became less structural, the point of view became non-linear, fragmented, the characters became ambivalent and the time/space is built through collective memories.

In *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature, 1890-1930*, Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane shed some light on the discussion:

Modernism... is the art that responds to the scenario of our chaos. It is the art consequent on Heisenberg's 'uncertainty principal', of the destruction of civilization and reason in the First World War, of the world changed and reinterpreted by Marx, Freud and Darwin, of Capitalism and constant industrial acceleration, of existential exposure or absurdity. (BRADBURY & MCFARLANE, 1991, p. 11)

It was precisely such controversial context that became a seedbed for a variety of forms of expression. The existential absurdity that hovered around that period produced changes in many areas of knowledge. In the field of philosophy, existentialism was responsible to put the human living individual in the center of discussion. The new philosophical movement along with some other studies, as the case of Freud's theory of the unconscious, helped to forge the framing of modern literature.

## **2 Hemingway and Joyce**

Despite coming from different countries, Hemingway (1899-1961) from The United States and James Joyce (1882-1941) from Ireland, they met in Paris in 1921 and kept a sort of relationship that went beyond going to bars together and getting into fights. Hemingway, a young writer by that time, once in Paris, visited Silvia Beach, the owner of the famous bookstore, Shakespeare and Company, and the one who was in charge of publishing *Ulysses* by Joyce for the first time. Hemingway brought a letter of introduction written by Sherwood Anderson to hand in to Joyce, and that was the beginning of a relationship that resulted in reciprocal admiration regarding their works.

In Richard Ellmann's biography of James Joyce, first published in 1952, the reader can have access to some of the comments that Hemingway made in relation to *Ulysses*, after his apparently partial reading of the work. He writes a letter to Sherwood Anderson in which he remarks: "Joyce has a most goddamn wonderful book. It'll probably reach you in time" (ELLMANN, 1982, p. 602). Joyce also praised Hemingway's work, in an interview with

journalist Ole Vinding, amidst the various topics discussed in that moment, the conversation moved to Hemingway and Joyce makes the following comment:

We were with him just before he went to Africa. He promised us a living lion. Fortunately we escaped that. But we would like to have the book he has written. He's a good writer, Hemingway. He writes as he is. We like him. He's a big, powerful peasant, as strong as a buffalo. A sportsman. And ready to live the life he writes about. He would never have written it if his body had not allowed him to live it. But giants of his sort are truly modest; there is much more behind Hemingway's form than people know. (ELLMANN, 1982, p.695)

Along with such flattering comment on Hemingway's work during that conversation, there is also an excerpt of a letter that Joyce wrote to a friend, commenting on one of the short stories by Hemingway, that excerpt is available at a website dedicated to the members of the "Lost generation". Joyce remarks that: "He [Hemingway] has reduced the veil between literature and life, which is what every writer strives to do. Have you read 'A Clean, Well-Lighted Place'?...It is masterly. Indeed, it is one of the best stories ever written..."

Even though Hemingway's short story mentioned by Joyce will not be part of the analytical section of this work, it is worth bringing an excerpt of it to reflect upon the strength of the passage, which could be said to be a good example of the reunion of many elements that shaped modernism, which we mentioned and discussed in the introduction:

What did he fear? It was not a fear or dread. It was a nothing that he knew too well. It was all a nothing and a man was a nothing too. It was only that and light was all it needed and a certain cleanness and order. Some lived in it and never felt it but he knew it all was nada y pues nada y nada y pues nada. Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name thy kingdom nada thy will be nada in nada as it is in nada. Give us this nada our daily nada and nada us our nada as we nada our nadas and nada us not into nada but deliver us from nada; pues nada. Hail nothing full of nothing, nothing is with thee. He smiled and stood before a bar with a shining steam pressure coffee machine. (HEMINGWAY, 1933, s/p.)

This passage seems to illustrate well the existential absurdity that modernism in literature was in charge to respond to. We intend, hereafter, to bring some more examples along with a brief analysis of the English works proposed for this paper.

### **3 Hemingway's short stories**

Hemingway's works are clearly an example of these changes in fiction. Both short stories – "Hills like white elephants" and "One reader writes" – do not present what Brooks & Warren (1979) and Hutcheon (2001) named as "cause-effect". In other words, they do not

follow a structural model of literature. There is no traditional narrator to guide us, a beginning with an explanation, a middle with a climax, neither an end with a denouement.

“One reader writes” is part of Hemingway’s third short story collection, published in 1933. The work breaks the literary conventions both in terms of content and form. Its content depicts social issues related to marriage problems and sexually transmittable diseases. Contents like those, depicting social problems related to family, became more evident in literature with the modernist movement. This Hemingway’s work explores these themes in an unconventional form, divided into three parts. The first one describes a scene in which there is a woman, main character of the short story:

She sat at the table in her bedroom with a newspaper folded open before her and only stopping to look out of the window at the snow which was falling and melting on the roof as it fell. She wrote this letter, writing it steadily with no necessity to cross out or rewrite anything. (HEMINGWAY, 1933, s/p.)

The letter is the second part of the story and is addressed to a doctor, written from Roanoke, Virginia, in February 6, 1933. A young wife writes to the doctor to ask him for some advice about a health problem. She says that she married an army soldier in service in 1929 in U. S. In the same year, he was sent to China and when returning, after three years, she describes he contracted syphilis and she is afraid to confide it to her parents because her father position: “I often heard my Father say one could well wish themselves dead if once they became a victim of that malady”.

At the end of the letter, she mentions she has a daughter and thanks him. In this moment, there is a break in the form of the text from the letter to narration, and then, the text moves to the third part, related to the character’s thoughts:

Thanking you and trusting wholly in your advice I am

and signed her name.

Maybe he can tell me what’s right to do, she said to herself. Maybe he can tell me. In the picture in the paper he looks like he’d know. He looks smart, all right. Every day he tells somebody what to do. He ought to know. I want to do whatever is right. It’s such a long time though. It’s a long time. And it’s been a long time. My Christ, it’s been a long time. He had to go wherever they sent him, I know, but I don’t know what he had to get it for. Oh, I wish to Christ he wouldn’t have got it. I don’t care what he did to get it. But I wish to Christ he hadn’t ever got it. It does seem like he didn’t have to have got it. I don’t know what to do. I wish to Christ he hadn’t got any kind of malady. I don’t know why he had to get a malady. (HEMINGWAY, 1933, s/p.)

We can notice a historical and cultural issue, namely, women submission in relation to male images. In the text, it is represented by the words written in capital letters: Doctor, Husband, and Father. Besides, the character presents limited experiences concerning sexually transmittable diseases: “I don’t know how to spell the word, but it sound like ‘sifilus’”. She also waits for her husband and mentions him with great respect: “I believe my Father but want to believe my Husband most”.

The short story’s title is also an attempt to break the literary conventions. Not only the elements of fiction (plot, character, point of view, setting, and meaning) presented by Scholes (1991) are blurred, but also the roles of reader and writer. Both are involved in the process of meaning-making. The reader mentioned in the title is also the writer. The point of view is non-linear. The narration begins in *media res*, i.e., it opens in the midst of story. What we know is told us by two narrators. The first one narrates an external occurrence while the second one narrates an internal process (AUERBACH, 2007). The external occurrence is the action of reading a newspaper and looking out the window. The internal process is the character’s reflection about the fact that triggered the action of writing the letter. Also, there is a stream of consciousness that hinders the distinction between what the character (the reader/writer) thinks and what she writes.

In the same way, in “Hills like white elephants” (1927), prior to “One reader writes”, we also do not have a traditional narrator to guide us, neither a conventional plot. The narrator gives us a brief description about the setting in the first paragraph and presents the two main characters: the American – depicted throughout the story as man – and the girl:

The hills across the valley of the Ebro' were long and white. On this side there was no shade and no trees and the station was between two lines of rails in the sun. Close against the side of the station there was the warm shadow of the building and a curtain, made of strings of bamboo beads, hung across the open door into the bar, to keep out flies. The American and the girl with him sat at a table in the shade, outside the building. It was very hot and the express from Barcelona would come in forty minutes. It stopped at this junction for two minutes and went on to Madrid. (HEMINGWAY, 1927, s/p.)

We do not know exactly why they are there in the station, but it is possible to raise some questions: if they are a couple, why has not the narrator depicted her as a woman or him as a lad? Why are they travelling? The reader does not have an exposition to orient him/her. The narrator does not control the characters and the reader can (not) follow the story from the dialogue established by the characters.

The speech “Let’s drink beer” and others referred to drinks throughout the short story suggest the act of experimenting new things, but the drinks are unknown to the girl. In other words, there is a man (which suggests maturity) presenting new things to a girl (which suggests immaturity):

The girl looked at the bead curtain. “They’ve painted something on it,” she said. “What does it say?”  
“Anis del Toro. It’s a drink.”  
“Could we try it?”  
The man called “Listen” through the curtain. The woman came out from the bar.  
“Four reales.”  
“We want two Anis del Toro.”  
“With water?”  
“Do you want it with water?”  
“I don’t know,” the girl said. “Is it good with water?” “It’s all right.”  
(HEMINGWAY, 1927, s/p.)

The comparison established by the girl and presented in the title (Hills like white elephants) suggests a problem, since white elephants are seen as a problem, but the reader does not have a clear view of what it is. The reader can conjecture the problem when the man says: “It’s not really an operation at all. [...] They just let the air in and then it’s all perfect natural”. These issues are not explained in the text, as in many stories by Hemingway, but we raise a question about an unwanted pregnancy and a possible abortion. One more time, the reader does not have a conclusion, a solution of the story, but an array of clues used by language to reflect about social events.

Both Hemingway’s works present strong traces of the patriarchy. The woman condition pointed in “One reader writes” is strongly approached by theoretical feminists until today. Although there are many changes, women experiences have already been limited to the domestic sphere and problems related to sexually transmittable diseases are a reality for many wives nowadays. In the short story, it is not possible to attest – and this a feature of modern fiction – if the character is also infected, but this allows us to reflect about the high number of married woman that contract sexually transmittable diseases for not using a condom with their husbands.

#### **4 “The sisters” by James Joyce**

“The sisters” is the first story of the collection of fifteen short stories of *Dubliners*, first published as a book in 1914, after years of negotiation with editors. The collection faced

a refusal after another under a series of allegations in relation to its content and use of vocabulary. In one of Joyce's letters to his editor, he presents the aims and method that made part of the elaboration of *Dubliners*:

My intention was to write a chapter of the moral history of my country and I chose Dublin for the scene because that city seemed to me the centre of paralysis. I have tried to present it to the indifferent public under four of its aspects: childhood, adolescence, maturity and public life. The stories are arranged in this order. I have written it for the most part in a style of scrupulous meanness and with the conviction that he is a very bold man who dares to alter in the presentment, still more to deform, whatever he has seen and heard. (PEAKE, 1977, p. 1)

In this brief presentation of his method to write such book, it is easy to argue, as many critics did, that it belongs to the realist or to the symbolist movement in literature, once the proposal of the book was the depiction of the moral history of the country, focusing, as we can notice by reading it, on some controversial aspects of the society of that time, going against the grain of the Irish Literary Revival, which fomented quite a romantic view of Ireland. However, as it is argued by Hugh Kenner in *Dublin's Joyce* (1956, p. 13) that in Joyce's work, "the usual criterion of style, that it disappear like glass before the reality of the subject, doesn't apply to his pages. The language of Dublin is the subject".

In this perspective, which is also assumed by many other critics, that places the implicit language as a sort of main character or rather establishes, through the use of the implicit language, an impossibility to separate form from content, such fact that can be well visualized through the book, is an ultimate feature to exemplify or distinguish a work that belongs to the modernist movement from another that could be described as realist or symbolist only.

The first short story of *Dubliners* is constructed by means of the perceptive of a boy. He starts the story telling us about somebody's third stroke and the lack of hope for this person to be healed again. The reader is invited to plunge into his reveries: thoughts about the imminent death of the character not yet introduced to us, and remembrances of conversations between them. The moment the reader finds out that the mysterious person is a reverend is when another character called Mr. Cotter, who is talking to the aunt of the narrator, utters a range of unfinished sentences with a reproachful tone on them and finally both the narrator and the reader find out that they are about Father Flynn. The way in which the narrative is constructed, surrounded by an aura of mystery and reticence that can be noticed in the behavior of some characters, implies or even leads the reader to some suspicions.



In “The sisters” it seems that there is a sort of veiled accusation of pedophilia, the way that Mr. Cotter talks about the friendship of the boy and the reverend leaves the reader in a state of suspension. On the one hand, there is space to consider this accusation by means of some textual indications that will be showed in the sequence of this analysis, but on the other hand, other characters, as it is the case of the aunt of the boy, make the reader consider the possibility of prejudice on the part of Mr. Cotter. Even though it is true that there are many cases of pedophilia involving reverends of the Catholic Church, maybe it may not be the case of father Flynn. It is an auspicious manner that Joyce found to approach or to allude to such sad reality of the Irish society. Nothing is outspoken in the sense of being a direct accusation but it gives food for thought.

The reticent and judgmental Mr. Cotter brings the news that the reverend was dead. The uncle of the narrator mentions that father Flynn and the boy were friends. Once more Mr. Cotter expresses his contrary opinion about such kind of relation. We then learn about the narrator’s feelings and his effort to try to figure out the meaning of the unfinished sentences spoken by Mr. Cotter. The next day, the boy goes to Father Flynn’s house but is afraid to knock and enter it, at that moment we have access to much of his thought. In the evening, the boy and his aunt attend the funeral. Most of what follows in the narrative takes place in the living room of the house of Father Flynn’ sisters. Their conversation is almost all completely quoted by the narrator in the short story.

In this work, the reader does not have access to strong evidence of almost anything. The text seems open and the narrator refuses to guide the reader. The uncertainty created in the mind of the reader along the story can be exemplified in many passages. We could question about the feelings of the narrator and protagonist about father Flynn, for instance. What we have is a range of clues that lead us to different directions. In the opening of the story when the narrator first mentions father Flynn, we cannot tell if he is expecting his death as a kind of relief or if he is sorrowful about it.

The next time we hear about the reverend is through Mr. Cotter: “No, I wouldn’t say he was exactly... but there was something queer... there was something uncanny about him. I’ll tell you my opinion...” (JOYCE, 1914, p.7). Mr. Cotter continues his talk with more open sentences: “I have my own theory about it,” he said. “I think it was one of those ... peculiar cases .... But it’s hard to say...” (JOYCE, 1914, p.7). After that, he adds that it is not good for children to have much to say with a man like that, however, he never speaks out a real reason

for his admonition. The narrator expresses his rage about the comments made by Mr. Cotter but for a different reason, he did not like to be referred to as a child.

The next morning, when the protagonist decided to visit the reverend's house by himself, before the moment he would go with his aunt to the funeral, he had the following reflection: "I found it strange that neither I nor the day seemed in a mourning mood and I felt even annoyed at discovering in myself a sensation of freedom as if I had been freed from something by his death" (JOYCE, 1914, p.11). The more the reader thinks some revelation is being outlined the more it seems hard to jump to conclusion. Language is used in a way that no certainty can be assumed.

As Sonja Bašić, in her essay *A Book of Many Uncertainties: Joyce's Dubliners*, remarks:

This story can therefore be seen as the very embodiment of "the uncertainty principle", indicating that experience is unfathomable (the boy is confused, he does not know what his feelings are particularly in respect to the shocking fact including the sense of liberation it brings), and, more important that the powers of narrative (language) are limited in their attempt to represent the experience of the world. (BAŠIĆ, 1998, p.23)

By means of the analysis of "The sisters" it was possible to perceive a striking feature of modernism which was first discussed by Bradbury & Mcfarlane, (1991) and then also mentioned by Bašić (1998): the "uncertainty principle", term borrowed from Heisenberg to discuss the openness of the modern text.

## **5 Conclusion**

The relation between fact and fiction permeates all literature. Although, roughly speaking, fiction can be defined as a made up story, the existence of fiction does not imply the nonexistence of facts, as we discussed before. With the world's changes from the twentieth century on, literature, as well as other areas of knowledge, has undergone changes. In order to depict facts, modern fiction has addressed and explored issues, as the ones seen in the short stories approached in this paper, in a different form. In this way of making literature we do not find an explanation in the beginning neither a denouement. There is no traditional European model of literature. The story telling focuses on provoking discomfort in the readers and on breaking the literary conventions. As readers, we have an important role: unveil the elements of fiction that seem welded.

By means of the exercise of analysis of the texts proposed in this paper, we could get to the conclusion that both Hemingway's texts and Joyce's "The sisters" are interesting literary sources to discuss the modifications operated by the modernist literary movement. Through the self-conscious changes in the structure of the narrative, which could be perceived through the break of traditional ways of writing, a new way to interpret the text and the world was born. The examples we selected are only the tip of the iceberg to provoke a reflection about social events depicted through fiction.

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