Scott Burbidge

Eng 311

Final

1. What is “modernism”? Discuss Joyce, Kundera, Calvino, and/or Kafka, underscoring the modernist dimensions of the writings we studied this quarter. How does European modernist literature differ from European literature of the 19th century?

Modernism is a 20th century movement in art of international nature. It is in large part a response to the breakdown of social constructs thought to be reliable prior to the time surrounding the First World War. It is a movement away from the commercialization of art to a more realistic, gritty and complex look at the world we live in. Modernist literature is often constructed of fragment, with shorter works containing one fully realized fragment and longer works being the amalgamation of several somewhat disconnected fragments. Joyce’s *Dubliners* is a good example of this fragmented style with it’s many unrelated, partially complete stories which never let the reader completely grasp any one character but in the end relays a wider understanding of the human condition in and around Dublin. This larger coherence of the work is not readily apparent and according to modernist theory not entirely important, with the search for meaning being more significant than the actual discovery of meaning. *Dubliners* is also a good example of the Modernist aesthetic of shock. Topics that were once not talked about in literature such as masturbation, adultery, pedophilia and alcoholism become themes that are openly discussed. Modernism places a strong importance on the individual. We can see a profound example of this in Kafka’s *The Hunger Artist.* In it we see an intense concentration on the hunger artist’s own satisfaction with his work even as the infrastructure that once supported his art comes falling down around him. Even with this focus on the individual Modernism is also defined by a reliance on multiple perspectives and varying interpretation. Kafka does not allow us to view the artist as simply a talented, principled artist. He also seems to propose the idea near the end of the story that the artist may be fasting simply because there is not food he likes, not as some great artistic statement. This leaves the reader, and possibly Kofka himself, unsure of the true motivations of the artist thus leaving the story up for multiple interpretations. Kundera’s *Edward and God* illustrates further common themes employed by the Modernist movement. In it Kundera seems to be openly critiquing two of the institutions that the Modernist have become disillusion with; religion and socialism. It is a prime example of the turning from idealization of previous generations that the modernist movement represented. *Edward and God* also features heavy allusions to the bible, which along with the many literary texts referred to in Calvino’s *The Adventure of a Reader*, illustrates Modernism constant references to earlier work of fiction or mythology. Both of these two works also include Modernisms focus on psychological issues. In Kundera’s work we see an in depth view of the motivations and though processes of not only Edward but also the Directress and Alice. We see the substantial influence desperation and idealization can have on the human psyche and how it reacts to the world around it. In  *The Adventure of a Reader* we experience the long internal dialogue of the reader and the eventual affect outside pressures have on this dialogue. In the end Modernism differs from 19th century literature in its movement away from fantastical and idealized views of the world to a more realistic, and perhaps disheartening, interpretation of the human condition.

1. Compare and contrast the impact of Catholicism upon James Joyce, specifically with respect to the first three tales from Dubliners. What is lost if Joyce’s reader has little or not familiarity with the Catholic religion? What is gained if he/she is aware if the cultural iconography and doctrines of the Catholic church?

The question of how Joyce viewed Catholicism (i.e. whether he found its influence positive or negative) is a complicated and possibly (as long as with regards to *Dubliners*) unanswerable one. The stories often provide a confused and contradictory view of the Church. In the opening story of *Dubliners*, “The Sisters”,we are presented with a creepy and strange priest, Father Flynn, who appears to have had a bad, or at least strange influence on the Narrator. This at first seems to be critical of The Church but eventually we learn that Father Flynn is a fallen, or disgraced priest and may not be doing the bidding of The Church. It is difficult to interpret whether the priest is such an odd presence because he fell away form The Church or because he represents what The Church makes of people. In the end the Narrator and the reader are left confused and not sure how to view their journey through the story.

In the second story, “The Encounter”, the questions becomes even more convoluted. We are first represented with the image of a Catholic school that seems repressive and abusive, leaving the boys to operate in a world of fantasy disconnected from the world they live in. However, when the boys decide to take a journey away from the school, literally to the Pigeon House, figuratively away from The Church, they are confronted with a world that seems dangerous. Again we have to ask whether Joyce is saying that The Church provides the boys with protection from this harsh outside reality or is he claiming that The Church has caused them to view the world in an unrealistic, ultimately untenable way.

Araby, the third story is not directly about The Church but may give us a clue to Joyce’s feelings on the status quo in Dublin. In The story the Narrator experiences a kind of change of person. After talking to the girl he has become obsessed with he loses all interest in doing the routine things, like school, that he is supposed to do. He ultimately experiences the abandonment of the routine things in life as a personal failure. It could be that Joyce is expressing a faith in doing the routine, which in Dublin would include going to Church. Again though this is vague and perhaps that only thing that can be said about Joyce’s view on the Church is that he doesn’t really want the reader to know. He is probably vague to lend credence to multiple perspectives, as is the want of Modernist writers.

Joyce’s *Dubliners* is not a text that is particularly readable for those unfamiliar with Catholic traditions and iconography. If we assume Joyce uses polysemy a large portion, if not all of the symbolic and allegorical meaning in his text are completely lost on the reader. Indeed *Dubliners* cannot really be read a important piece of literature without a knowledge of the Catholic Church.

1. To what extent may we consider Shawn Wong’s American Knees and Jamie Ford’s Hotel at the Corner of Bitter and Sweet to be “regional” novels, grounded in the history and culture of the Pacific Northwest? In responding to this question, differentiate aspects of these novels that might appeal to a Pacific Northwest versus Chinese audience.

I do not think one could consider *American Knees* to be a Pacific Northwest regional novel. As it takes place mostly in San Francisco, with only cursory mentions of Portland and Seattle, it only takes place on the very periphery of the Northwest. It may be fair to call it a West Coast regional novel because of the heavier influence and integration of Asian culture that has occurred on the west coast and which seems to influence the novel. Given how inwardly focused the novel is on its few main characters it is hard to imagine that the story couldn’t take place anywhere in the United States. I do not think there is enough to call *American Knees* a regional novel of any kind. I think its appeal to a Pacific Northwest audience is no more than its appeal to any American reader who is interested in the struggles of identity in our diverse country. My only guess as to how it appeals to a Chinese audience is what Professor Wong said in his talk with us. He seemed to think that the only interest to Chinese audience is the curiosity with how Chinese people behave outside of China. It does not seem that the Chinese would specifically identify with *American Knees* because I think in the end it is more of an American novel than anything else.

*The Hotel at the Corner of Bitter and Sweet* is without a doubt a Pacific Northwest regional novel. It relies much more heavily on the specific cultures, especially during the nineteen forties, that resided and formed in the Seattle area than *American Knees* does. The novel relies heavily on the specific tensions between Chinatown and Japantown in Seattle. It is much richer in references to places and industries located in Seattle. It mentions Goeducks and many more things very specific to the Northwest. I think mush more important is the culture surrounding the Jazz movement in Seattle. This is a key element of the novel that would be difficult to replicate in another place. This would not be the same novel if not for the music of Oscar Holden. I think what is important to decide about a novel is if it could feasibly occur in any other place, if so then I would doubt that it could be considered a regional novel. Another important regional feature to the novel is the Chinese Nationalist movement in the Northwest that Henry’s father was a part of. The thing that if difficult when trying to identify if a certain regional audience will find a novel more appealing is that it is more of a matter of feel than it is references to familiar places. I think *The Hotel at the Corner of Bitter and Sweet* captures that specific wet somewhat claustrophobic yet comfortable feel of the Northwest and that more than any other is why I would say it is a regional novel. Again I think the appeal to a Chinese audience would be more one of curiosity than identification.