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A Christmas Carol and The Dead

Modernism and Victorianism were two major literary movements that really contradicted each other. On one hand, Victorian literature had a lot of realism in it and experimented with supernaturalism and over-exaggerations. On the other hand, Modernism was very simplistic, the stories were things that could have and sometimes had happened in real life, but they were stories that had a deeper meaning without needing the over-exaggerations that Victorian literature. The Modern style purposely rivaled that of Victorianism, and Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* and James Joyce's *The Dead* were a wonderful example of this rivalry.

In Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* on page 1412, Scrooge has asked the Ghost of Christmas Present what the two things sticking out of the bottom of his robe are, and they turn out to be children. When Scrooge asks if they are his, the ghost replies: "They are Man's...And they cling to me, appealing from their fathers. This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased. Deny it!" (Dickens 1412). This, to me is an great example of both realism and supernaturalism combined. Not only is the ghost himself a supernatural element, but the two children who cling to him are also supernatural because they are a part of him, and really more of a metaphor. The children

are previously described as extremely poor, and as if they look like they've been tortured in many different ways.

They were a boy and girl. Yellow, meager, ragged, scowling, wolfish; but prostrate, too, in their humility. Where graceful youth should have filled their features out, and touched them with its freshest tints, a stale and shrivelled hand, like that of age, had pinched, and twisted them, and pulled them into shreds. Where angels might have sat enthroned, devils lurked; and glared out menacing. No change, no degradation, no perversion of humanity, in any grade, through all the mysteries of wonderful creation, has monsters half so horrible and dread (Dickens 1412).

This is the realism aspect of the scene. Dickens uses the abuse of the poor and multiplies it by placing it on children, and then goes to great lengths to describe the horrible looks of these children and the horrible things they must have been through. He then uses it to criticize the prisons and workhouses by having the Spirit mock Scrooge's questions from the first stave: "'Have they no refuge or resource?' cried Scrooge. 'Are there no prisons?' said the Spirit, turning on him for the last time with his own words. 'Are there no workhouses?'" (Dickens 1412). The intense realism in this scene is extremely Victorian, and I think it is a good example of the over-exaggeration that the Victorians used to portray the bigger issues of the times.

In Joyce's *The Dead*, on pages 2236 to 2237, the main character Gabriel has an encounter with a woman named Miss Ivors. The way that the conversation just blends into the story as if it is insignificant is what I think makes the story really modern. The only thing that pulls the conversation out and makes it stand out is the first thing that came out of Miss Ivors's mouth: "I have a crow to pluck with you." She then goes on to criticize him for

writing for *The Daily Express*, which according to the footnotes is “a conservative paper opposed to the struggle for Irish independence,” and she then calls him a “West Briton.” A “West Briton” was a name that people who stood for the movement for Irish independence would use for someone who identified Ireland as British. The simple statement of “I didn’t think you were a West Briton” (Joyce 2236), is a simple approach to a big issue of that time, “The Irish Question.”

—And haven’t you your own language to keep in touch with—Irish? Asked Miss Ivors.

—Well, said Gabriel, if it comes to that, you know, Irish is not my language.

Their neighbours had turned to listen to the cross-examination. Gabriel glanced right and left nervously and tried to keep his good humour under the ordeal which was making a blush invade his forehead.

—And haven’t you your own land to visit, continued Miss Ivors, that you know nothing of, your own people, and your own country?

—O, to tell you the truth, retorted Gabriel suddenly, I’m sick of my own country, sick of it! (Joyce 2237)

From here, Miss Ivors stumps him after asking “Why?” because he doesn’t really have an answer. This was a good example of modernism because it is a simple approach to a big issue, Gabriel is Irish, but has been so weaved into English society that he wants nothing to do with his own country or language, and has even been transformed into a “West Briton,” which shows how much Irish culture was being stamped out of the Irish people.

These two texts were great examples of Victorianism and Modernism and how they rivaled each other. Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* took a common issue of the time, that the

poor would be sent to either workhouses or debtors prisons because that was all society was willing to do for them, and made it more intense by showing Scrooge, who was the extreme of people who just didn't care about those poor people, and the children Want and Ignorance, who were the extreme of the poor children that ultimately changed Scrooges mind about the workhouses and prisons. Joyce's *The Dead* took an issue of the time, the "Irish Question," which was basically that Ireland wanted its independence, but struggled to gain it, and made it very small and simple with one Irish man who didn't really care at all about his own country and people until the very end when he had his epiphany of Ireland being buried in snow. The differences between the two texts, and the fact that Victorianism came before Modernism, is proof that the Modernists strived to pull away from the Victorian era and create their own style.

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