

# Joyce and the Witnessing Narrative

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MRP Proposal, by Adan Jerreat-Poole  
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## Overview

This paper will explore how Joyce uses the space of the courtroom and the language of the legal system to critique traditional literary structures that confine the other to the subaltern status of “victim” and deny their need for acknowledgement. Joyce ultimately redefines the witnessing narrative in order to illuminate invisible hierarchies inherent in historical constructions of trauma and to break these bonds. While he is particularly interested in the experience of the Irish, his project applies to all colonized peoples and marginalised Others. The three stories/scenes that will be explored are “A Painful Case” from *Dubliners*, *Ulysses*’ “Circe” episode, and the “Festy King” trial scene in section I.4 of *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce’s most mature work. I will also be drawing from Joyce’s 1907 essay “Ireland at the Bar,” which describes the trial of Myles Joyce, a Gaelic defendant who did not speak English, and whose (mis)interpreter ultimately sealed his guilty verdict.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” comes to the conclusion that “the subaltern cannot speak” (308 ). Her essay identifies two aspects of the communication process: speaking and hearing. While the other is often prevented from speaking, more often the lack of a listener systematic silences and victimizes the subaltern. She is also concerned with “representation as ‘speaking for,’ as in politics, and representation as ‘re-presentation,’ as in art or philosophy” (275). Speaking for another is part of this systematic silencing. In the courtroom, a lawyer represents his or her client, yet Joyce’s characters often represent themselves in the public-political sphere. However, they also represent their people; the collective consciousness of Ireland is symbolized by single characters: Mr. Duffy, Leopold Bloom, and HCE. A third layer of representation in Joyce is that of language itself, which is invested in the struggle for true expression, even

though all language is alienating (Lacan), language structures itself around binaries (Derrida), and the displacement of the Irish language by the English language, making Joyce's representation possibly an act of violence in itself. Issues of representation(s) will be explored in my essay.

While sight is at times flawed in the Joycean canon, characters see much more than they hear. Joyce calls for a figurative synaesthesia in order to witness the other: "they might see on at hearing could they once smell of tastes from touch" (*FW* 355.4-5). There will be no Irish consciousness "Till Irinwakes from Slumber Deep" (321.17-18); if deafness is death, then hearing would be life, a re-animation and a recognition of the subaltern. Since "flowerers have ears, heahear!" (337.25-26), the flowers of rhetoric have the potential to cause this awakening of the ear through sight. The reader engages the musicality of the text and speech through the written word, through the eye. Joyce implies that readers can take up the missing role of witness and acknowledge the voice of the marginalized other.

Joyce was interested in witnessing throughout his entire career, and *Finnegans Wake*, his most mature text, embodies the Modernist witnessing narrative. In this text the language itself bears witness to the trauma of Irishness and makes the reader a witness as well. In the context of a court case, this witnessing is active and dynamic, one who bears testimony and can influence the outcome, one who is complicit in the act of trauma, rather than the distanced, passive witness of traditional accounts of historical trauma and commemorative witnessing narratives.

## Method

I will be adopting a psychoanalytic and ethical perspective in my analysis of these three texts. By starting with his early works and moving to his most finished work, I hope to mark a progression in Joyce's use of the courtroom and the lost witness. I will be closely engaged with Spivak's theory of the voiceless subaltern, as well as Christine van Boheemensaaf's critical text *Joyce, Derrida, Lacan, and the Trauma of History*. While I will not be using a Derridian or Lacanian lens in my own analysis, engaging in dialogue with these theories and her application of them in Joyce will be a fruitful endeavor. I will be considering Joycean ethics through the guidance of Marian Eide's *Ethical Joyce* and

Joseph Valente's *James Joyce and the Problem of Justice*. I will also be reading a wide range of Joycean criticism in order to situate my work in the contemporary field of Joyce studies.

## Timeline

**October 1st:** Detailed outline of MRP and extended annotated bibliography

**November 1st:** Summary of the rough draft of the paper with suggestions for revision and further research

**December 1st:** Final paper submission

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