



## James Joyce's Play *Exiles*: Individual Freedom versus Societal Norms

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### Abstract

After many unsuccessful productions by different directors, the real potential of *Exiles*, as a play, was revealed by Harold Pinter in 1970. James Joyce has influenced many writers with his works but he himself was motivated, while writing this play in 1912, by Henrik Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken*. Based on his personal autobiographical details, Joyce's play broadly deals with the individual's freedom. In this play Joyce tries to bridge the gap of his conscious and unconscious, through the character of Richard. His characters are far more real than those of Henrik in the play but the character of Richard is a case of split personality. He tries his best to defend his philosophy of total and unadulterated freedom, irrespective of societal norms, but it becomes problematic for him to negotiate his duality. Like the subject of the play and personality of the playwright, the structure of *Exiles* is also very complex. Some recent publications establish that Joyce took the liberty of creating certain extremely odd situations in his real life to use them in his works. On one hand, this underlines his courage to experiment but also exposes his disregard towards the social and family commitments especially towards his sober wife.

**Keywords:** James Joyce, Henrik Ibsen, *Exiles*, *When We Dead Awaken*, Peter Brooks, Ezra Pound, George Bernard Shaw, Samuel Becket

### Introduction

The modernist James Joyce is better known as a novelist and a poet; the only play written by him, *Exiles*, is generally ignored by the critics; maybe because it is an ambiguous and confusing text for some and its initial production history is not too inspiring. A. Walton Litz terms it as a failed drama on many counts. Written in the year 1918, its first performance at Berlin

in German language in 1919 was considered incomprehensible by the audience. Ezra Pound, otherwise an ardent supporter of Joyce, made situation for the author further wicked when he commented that “Mr Joyce's play is dangerous and un-stage-able not because he is playing with the subject of adultery, but because he is actually driving in the mind upon the age-long problem of the rights of personality and of the responsibility of the intelligent individual for the conduct of those about him, upon the age-long question of the relative rights of intellect, and emotion, and sensation, and sentiments” (qtd. in Southam, 68). Another Joyce supporter W. B. Yeats also rejected the play. The play’s first English production in New York in 1925 received mixed reviews. The result was no different when it was staged in London the very next year. Until 1950 there were no more productions.

But the play was considered to be extraordinary by another set of notable people. George Bernard Shaw publicly supported this play. The production done by Harold Pinter in November 1970 in London changed the whole scenario as it created an impact that made people think afresh about the text. What was not worthy of stage for Ezra Pound about fifty years ago, now the production itself was described by the playwright Frank Marcus as an honour to Harold Pinter for “lifting the veil and revealing the treasure” (qtd. in “Exile”). In a letter written to Pinter on 21 April, 1969, Samuel Becket wrote, “You’re a brave man to take on Exiles. I understand your excitement. I often wondered how it could be done” (qtd. in “Exile”). This is an acknowledgment of Pinter’s talent as a stage director as well as a compliment to the art of Joyce’s writing. Martin Esslin sums up the boldness of the text and also sees its impact all around, especially in Albee and Pinter’s plays:

The scene in which, having allowed herself to be kissed by her 'seducer', Bertha then meticulously reports all that happened to her husband is of astonishing boldness: there is much here of Albee, much also of Ruth's nonchalance about sex in Pinter's own *The*

*Homecoming*. On one level this is uncompromisingly honest Edwardian free thinking, on another it is sexual fantasy right out of Pinter's *The Lover*. (qtd. in "Exile").

On one hand *Exiles* has inspired playwrights like Edward Albee and Harold Pinter in writing dramas like *The Homecoming* and *The Lovers*; and on the other, *Exiles* itself is directly influenced by *When We Dead Awaken* written by Henrik Ibsen. One of the objectives of this paper is to have limited comparative study of these two texts and to understand what James Joyce tries to convey, who otherwise is considered to be one of the most obscure writers. To begin with, we need to underline that Joyce was a great fan of Ibsen and he learnt the Norwegian language to read its literature, especially Ibsen's texts in their original language. He wrote an appreciation of Ibsen's play *When We Dead Awaken* shortly after its publication, the paper was carried by *The Fortnightly Review*. As reported by William Archer, Ibsen was appreciative of the review. James Joyce applauds Ibsen for his mastery over his dialogue, his art of converting narration into drama, his deep understanding of the psyche of the women, his symbolism etc. In Joyce's words, "Ibsen's plays do not depend for their interest on the action, or on the incidents. Even the characters, faultlessly drawn though they be, are not the first thing in his plays. But the naked drama – either the perception of a great truth, or the opening up of a great question, or a great conflict which is almost independent of the conflicting actors, and has been and is of far-reaching importance – this is what primarily rivets our attention" (qtd. in Houe 5). What also appeals to Joyce is that Ibsen is trying to see, through the eyes of a woman, the particular characteristics of a man who is an artist. In James's words the problem of mutual happiness is the core of *When We Dead Awaken*.

Now let us have a close look at *Exiles* that was written after about 20 years of Ibsen's writing *When We Dead Awaken*. *Exiles* has almost the same theme. Mutual happiness depends

upon freedom if we are ready to give it to our companions and friends. It is also said that *Exiles* has some traces of autobiographical details of Joyce's personal life. The main character Richard Rowan is an irritable and tormented person who is very unhappy with his surroundings. Bertha is his unmarried wife who resembles Joyce's wife Nora with whom he spent a semi-nomadic time in different parts of Europe; and like in the play the couple has a young child. Similarly, like Joyce, Richard also returns home when his mother is seriously ill who soon dies.

In both the plays the idea of an individual's freedom that has been projected as mutual happiness in Joyce's review of Ibsen's play, is in the foreground. Unlike Ibsen, it is not only the individual freedom but also the colliding societal expectations that overshadow Joyce's play. The undertones of guilt in *Exiles* are also part of the heritage that comes from Ibsen. Joyce not only calls Ibsen's play as 'naked drama' that projects the stark reality of our minds but also uses his style of language in *Exiles* to project that nakedness, contrary to very spirited and exciting language that he uses in his fiction. The flowery language often hides the thorny ideas that are to be communicated.

But we can not say that Joyce has just replicated the play, and the value of *Exiles* is limited to the interpretation of Ibsen play. Though an ardent fan of Ibsen, Joyce was aware that he had to take his modernism forward as is illustrated by what young Joyce wrote to an elderly Ibsen in a letter, "Your work on earth draws to a close and you are near the silence. It is growing dark for you. Many write of such things, but they do not know. You have only opened the way — though you have gone as far as you could upon it" (*Letters*). Such linkages between the different texts are part and parcel of the writing process of different writers. Even within the works of Joyce it has been said that *Exiles* is a precursor of *Ulysses* (Mahaffey). Ezra Pound and Michael Seidel also refers to it (Seidel 74). The

question before us is how far Joyce could, in his play *Exile*, take the ideas that Ibsen projected in his play.

In Joyce play Richard Rowen is the main character, who is the most distressed person. He does not have great feelings even for his dead mother. He accepts that his mother wrote to him before her death, bidding him to break from the past. But he is so uncomfortable with his relationship with the mother that there is no respect or love for the departed soul; maybe because she did not accept Bertha and their son Archie whom she called a 'child of sin and shame'. Though very strange, still he has some apparent reasons for the hatred reserved for his mother, his idea of freedom dominates his character that is not appreciated by his mother

Speaking to his journalist friend Robert when they remember the wild nights spent in an old house where they used to go and had two separate keys to unlock it, Robert calls it a place not only for merrymaking but also the hearth of a new life. They obliquely speak of their relationships with women and their bodies; these acts are sometimes called by Richard as sins. Richard is actually a victim of a dilemma. This is the past that his mother wanted him to forget and start afresh. But on one hand he is a protagonist of freedom, truth, transparency and altruism and on the other he is a person whose behaviour is far from normal. The freedom and transparency that he talks about is actually abnormal. He is practicing this and also has infused the same freedom and transparency in his companion Bertha. We wish your attention to a dialogue between the two. She tells him without any hesitation that after return of the family to the city a few months back, their old friend Robert had started showing a great interest in her and it reaches the following point:

Richard: Long kisses?

Bertha: Fairly long. (Reflects) Yes, the last time.

Richard (Rubs his hands slowly; then): With his lips?  
Or the other way.

Bertha: Yes, the last time.  
Richard: Did he ask you to kiss him?  
Bertha (Hesitates, then looking straight at him) I did.  
I kissed him.  
Richard: What way?  
Bertha: (With a shrug): O simply.  
Richard: Were you excited?  
Bertha: Well, you can imagine. (Frowning suddenly)  
Not much. He has not nice lips. Still, I was excited of  
course. But not like with you, Dick.  
Richard: Was he?  
Bertha: Excited? Yes, I think he was. He sighed. He  
was dreadfully nervous. (*Exiles* 47)

In this conversation the real question is not that if they actually went to bed and had a physical union as Kenneth Grose raises this issue more than once in his book *Literature in Perspective* (36-41). Whatever they did or didn't do will make no difference to the actual intention of Joyce who seems to create a much bigger question for us. Richard's idea of freedom is obvious in this interaction as he does not object to this relationship. The real question is how he himself reacts to this intimacy. We propose that Joyce rejects the idealism of Richard in a very subtle manner. Richard is actually not the person that he wishes to be known. Ibsen's Rubek seems to be a very unreal man who does sculpturing of a naked woman for three years and still does not touch her. But, after a long time his desire for her body surfaces. But Rubek still remains one man. In Richard we actually start seeing two persons; the duality of his personality needs to be evaluated through the theory of opposites suggested by Carl Jung. This duality makes his character and the play far more complex and layered. We can clearly see some traces of his second personality.

If we evaluate the series of dialogues mentioned above, we can see a clear conflict between his thoughts and his unconscious. He does not object to their mutual advances towards each other. Remaining true to his thoughts, he asks

Bertha to follow her own instincts. If she wishes to go to Robert as planned between them on that night, she must go. He actually approaches Robert to tell him that they should go ahead as planned and Robert should not be apologetic at all. But the major question remains: Is he actually very comfortable about this relationship that is developing between his friend and Bertha? Or in other words is he comfortable with their freedom that is not acceptable to him? We think he is not but at the same time he does not accept the fact. His disturbance can be seen in the above quoted short interaction very clearly, the way it develops. There are also some other strong indications of his unconscious being opposite to his thoughts. He claims that longing to possess a woman is not love, but he asks Robert about Bertha that what would happen when her beauty fades out; will he then stop loving her. It is a testimony to his possessive unconscious. Also, one can note the statement of Robert to Bertha that could be the key to Richard's unconscious, "[*Moves closer to her and presses her arm as he speaks.*] From every law, Bertha, from every bond. All his life he has sought to deliver himself. Every chain but one he has broken and that one we are to break. Bertha—you and I" (95).

It is not only her freedom but also the emotional existence that is harmed. No lady in the play is very happy with his being. Similarly, he is dissatisfied with all females. He is unhappy with his mother. He is tired of Bertha. Even Beatrice, with whom he also was in a relationship in the past along with Robert, is not happy with him. This explains Bertha's comments that he is the killer of three women.

Michael Seidel clearly asks, "What does Richard really think he wants? He seems to want all in all. He wants artistic freedom, free love, married love, fame, worship. He wants loyalty commensurate with his own sense of specialness" (77). Seidel also declares that "no matter how strenuously he denies it, the artist is also a jealous husband trapped in a triangle farce of his own making" (72). But what makes Richard an exceptional person is that he is trying to bridge the gaps,

between his unconscious and the conscious which are essentially opposites in Jungian thought. Richard, at one point of time, doesn't think that he has any right over Bertha. He also thinks that Bertha is innocent and he has killed the virginity of her soul. He neglected her and could not give her due. He tells Bertha, "There is something wiser than wisdom in your heart" (79). The biggest admission of Richard lies in the confessions that he makes in the end and exposes his suspicious nature. He says to Bertha, "It is not in the darkness of belief that I desire you, but in restless living wounding doubt... to hold you by no bonds, even of love, to be united with you in body and soul in utter darkness—for this I longed. And now I am tired for a while, Bertha my wound tires me" (125-26). These are the wounds of the soul. And thus, he also admits that although Bertha will tell him all the truths, he will never come to know about it. His wounding doubts will not allow him to understand anything.

The biggest hole in his character is in the indication that he might actually be provoking Bertha for infidelity and was in fact inspiring her and Robert to get involved so that he could go for his renewed relationship with Beatrice. Initially he complains to Robert, "I told you that I wished you not to do anything false and secret against me—against our friendship, against her; not to steal her from me craftily, secretly, meanly—in the dark, in the night—you, Robert, my friend" (71-2). But later he admits, "In the very core of my ignoble heart I longed to be betrayed by you and by her" (72). Maybe he wanted to get rid of Bertha and wished to have Beatrice instead. If that is not the case then why did he want to be betrayed? If that is true then where is his idea of freedom and transparency? Is he not a hypocrite?

Before we can say something conclusive about this exceptional character, we must try to understand, in a little greater detail, the character of his friend Robert. While Richard is a learned man who is involved seriously in writing work, Robert is a journalist. Richard, true to his profession of teaching

and scholarship, always talks big of values that are universal in nature, lasting and immaterial. On the contrary, the journalist approaches life in a temporal and pragmatic style. His total approach to the happenings is very practical and he is not bothered about subjects like freedom, transparency or the truth. The only value that can be seen in him is his respect for Richard's friendship with whom he spent his youth in cheerfulness. They enjoyed life together and with others, probably some females, for which they had rented a separate house and both had separate keys of the house. Richard started living with Bertha and left the city to come back a few months ago only. But Robert still keeps the house where he invites Bertha in the late evening, the day they had kissed. Robert was also involved in his cousin Beatrice. But the philosophy of his life is crystal clear. See his following dialogues:

No man ever yet lived on this earth who didn't long to possess. I mean to possess in flesh...the woman whom he loves. It's nature's law. (64)

Those are moments of sheer madness when one feels an intense passion for a woman. We see nothing, we think of nothing. Only to possess her. Call brutal, bestial, what you will. (64)

(There is no straight reply to this by Richard)

And he will say to us: Fools! Who told you that you were to give yourselves to one being only? You were made to give yourselves to many freely. I wrote that law with My finger on your hearts. (66)

Affection between man and woman must come to that (body union). We think too much of it because our minds are warped. (66)

His fleeting approach to life is so blatant that he evades a direct question by Bertha. In consideration of their 'future' she tells him that someday she will be old. Robert's reply is centred on the 'present', "I can't imagine it. Tonight, you are young and beautiful. Tonight, you have come back to me. Who knows

what will be tomorrow? I may never see you again or never see you as I do now” (94). When she asks him if he will suffer in her absence, he does not respond. It means he’ll not. He asks Bertha clearly if she loves him, or she loves both Richard and him, now she offers no answer. In fact, he does not wish to commit to the future and she still loves Richard. The practical man Robert withdraws himself.

Robert and Richard are great friends and they respect each other’s friendship. But their personalities are diagonally opposite. At a conscious level Richard tries to rise above the temporal because he is a writer. Robert is interested in the current moments as a true journalist. He is even ready to leave his claim on Bertha and is apologetic on what had happened between him and Bertha. He tells Richard about her kissing episode, “Passion tends to go as far as it can, but you may believe me or not, I had not that in my mind; to reach that end” (66). He is even ready to make a promise that he will not see Bertha anymore.

Although we have the similar kinds of characters in Ibsen play – Rubek and Ulfheim –but both of them are extremes of what they believe in. Both of them lack human elements. Rubek did not even touch the woman whom he saw naked for consecutive three-four years and she remains very upset about it. On the other hand, Ulfheim has been presented just like a monster. He takes Rubek’s wife to the mountain and changes his attitude towards her one eighty degrees. Maia calls him satyr. She then goes on to explain to him what is a satyr. He has a goat’s beard, and legs like a Billy goat and two ugly horns.

Does this play also raise the question of women’s existence? There are a number of such indications. But without going into this vast area at the moment, it is sufficient to say that by and large Joyce has tried to depict normal life-like ladies in the play. With the exception of Bertha, who narrates the kissing scene to her husband which actually seems to be the result of the teachings of Richard himself, she is a very

recognisable and a very dignified female of the time and not like Erene who has the patience of giving naked sittings before sculptor and keeping a grouse against him of not even touching him. Erene is just another extreme character like Rubek and Ulfheim. She always keeps a dagger with her even when she is in the bed. When she meets him after many years, she tells Professor Rubek that “Him I managed to drive (her diplomat husband) quite out of his mind...mad-incurably, inexorably mad” (Ibsen 46). He committed suicide. She murdered her second husband. She says that she has also killed her children. Whether these killings are real or symbolic, the character of Erene remains far from a normal person.

We also wish to make a passing remark on another important character of the play: Archie, the son of Richard and Bertha. He likes his father more than the mother because Bertha wishes him to learn certain things in perspective and she thinks that the freedom theory of Richard will spoil him. But actually, she is the one who mostly interacts with him and takes a positive interest in him. We don't see any significant reference to Archie in the conversations of Richard. Is he not bothered about him? Is his theory of freedom means negligence of his duties as a father? If we compare *Exiles* with *When we Dead Awaken* once again, we see the character of Nun in Ibsen play which represents society, norms and religion. Here in *Exiles* even this pressure is not there because Richard does not believe in societal norms. His mother calls their son 'sin and shame' but it affects Richard only to hate his mother. Moreover, in Ibsen play the statue created by Rubek is considered by Erene as her child, but in *Exiles* Bertha has a real child. The atmosphere of Ibsen play is very mysterious, as compared to Joyce's play.

James Joyce's play is very complex in its structure and its content. In the words of Seidel, “There are four triangles with each adult character mediating three . . . Depending upon how one aligns characters and reads the triangles, there can be as many as twelve plots with shifting points of meditations among the four main characters” (76). We cannot escape linking the

subject matter of this play with the real-life people and incidents of Joyce's life. Litz quotes Robert M Adams on this, "The Cornell University Library now holds several manuscript fragments of *Exiles* which differ in many respects from the published drama, and which appear to be parts of Joyce's private copy; in them the connections with his own life are unmistakable" (Litz 75). The complexity of Joyce's writings certainly gets strength from the fact that his personal life often dominates in his works. John McCourt writes, "Joyce used everything he came into contact with as a possible source for his creative projects, but he gave particular importance to events involving his immediate circle—Nora, his family, his friends—in order to mould them in his writing" (*James* 8). The most interesting and fascinating observation that McCourt further makes is that "He sometimes went so far as to make things happen in real life so that he could later fictionalise them; he rarely seems to have worried about the possible consequences for those directly involved" (*James* 8). This allegation against Joyce has also been corroborated by others like Seidel, "For Joyce the triangular desire is the gift that keeps on giving. Nora confided to a friend of Joyces, Frank Budgen, that, 'Jim wanted her to go with other men so that he would have something to write about'" (38).

If we start looking at Joyce in person, his wife Nora and friend Prezioso from this particular angle of connecting his personal life with the text of *Exiles*, another very strong dimension of the drama start emerging. John McCourt, the latest biographer of Joyce writes:

By the time Joyce was writing this, Prezioso had moved to Milan and, more importantly for Joyce's purpose, he had abandoned any claim on Nora, the "little Ireland". In the first edition of his book *James Joyce*, Richard Ellman suggested that the real object of Prezioso's longing was actually Joyce himself. Following objections from Prezioso family, Ellman was forced to withdraw this claim from the second edition, but

Branda Maddox revealed no such constraint when she stated that Prezioso was bisexual and fascinated by Joyce who was not ignorant of the psychological vagary called triolism in which a homosexual desire for someone is expressed in sharing, or dreaming of sharing a partner (*Years* 195).

McCourt, continuing quoting Ellman, makes this theory of homosexuality very explicit and convincing by bringing in the statement of Eileen Schaurek, Joyce's sister. In her conversation with Ellman, she says, "You mean he (Prezioso) was a homosexual? Yes. Very attracted towards Joyce." Ellman concludes, "While this, like many of Eileen's recollections, should be treated with caution, it is true that Joyce himself left hints to this effect in his notes for *Exiles*" (qtd. in McCourt, *Years* 195-96).

In his wonderful analysis of this play Vicky Mahaffey looks at the text from a new angle that how parental polarisation affects their child. He points out to three sets of people to explore this complex phenomenon of parenting: Richard's relations to his parents, Beatrice's relation to her parents and Archie's relation to Richard and Bertha:

In Act 1, Richard introduces the dilemma of how love is related to generosity by contrasting the generosity of his (dead) father with the hard-heartedness of his (also dead) mother...Love is not reducible to mere generosity, then, as much as Richard would like for it to be. And it is not generosity but principle that Richard needs, as we can see in his indulgently permissive relation to his own son, Archie...Beatrice's parental influence mirror Richard's with the genders reversed (Mahaffey 213).

Through the study of these relations Mahaffey tries to come to certain conclusions and exposes the duplicity of Richards character very effectively:

But Richard's attitude towards love is not that of the mature Joyce. The questions Richard never asks are, first, whether Bertha is *his* to give, and second, whether she is a *thing*. ("Do you understand what it is to give to give a thing"). It should be obvious that the answer is "no" to both the questions. Despite his predilection for masochistic sacrifice, Richard's motives are as possessive as Robert's. He tries to possess not only by giving but also by remembering; as Richard boasts, he never forgets anything (21).

Yet another way of looking at these characters is the perspective that Joyce himself creates by saying, "Bertha is fatigued and repelled by the restless curious energy of Richard's mind and her fatigue is soothed by Robert's placid politeness" (qtd. in McCourt, *Years* 194).

The subject matter that Joyce is handling obviously is very complex and layered. Just like his literary hero Ibsen, he presents the problem of freedom of a person and his relationships. But his characters are more life-like than those of Ibsen's; they are not mere symbols that are to be decoded. In *Exiles* all the characters are really independent and free to do whatever they wish to. But this freedom does not guarantee them any kind of happiness. In fact, the message that emerges is that we have to find the solutions while grappling with the reality within the framework of societal norms. All characters except Richard are following some norms even by breaking them for their personal lust and greed. There are limits to transgression of the norms. It is only Richard who is bent upon breaking all sorts of norms to enjoy fullest freedom forgetting that he is robbing the freedom of others. Even then he is not happy. Bertha, who suffers at his hand, is at least happier than him. That is why Bertha calls Richard as her strange wild lover. Strangeness and wildness make us extraordinary but these traits have to be organised to an extent. Even freedom has its boundaries; it does not mean chaos. One cannot spend life in an exile, one has to come back in the social fold and society does

not function without conventions. Although he himself remained in exile in his personal life, because he had rejected his native city of Dublin and had opted for the Italian city Trieste, yet Joyce does not make any black and white declaration about the 'exiles' in the play; it is more about the exiles from certain norms and conventions, and also their subsequent implications. As Prezioso leaves Nora ('the little Ireland') in the later days of Joyce's personal life, Robert also leaves Bertha in the play. These departures also signify, to an extent, the end of the exile. John McCourt writes; "'Self' and 'exile' are key terms for any understanding of Joyce's enterprise. His various forms of exile did not simply express cold detachment, but rather a distrust of and distaste for belonging and a fear of conformity" (*James* 9).

The character and personality of James Joyce who is a prototype of Richard is best summed up in the words of Nora whom McCourt has quoted in the following words:

As Nora said his motivation for pushing her towards other men was so 'that he will have something to write about.' Yet, when any of the men he encouraged to court her did so with any determination, he dared not see his longing carried through to its conclusion. His jealousy cut through his writerly needs and he reasserted his role as jealous husband by attacking Nora's suitors (such as Ottocaro Weiss) with a vehemence that was often excessive and unfair. (*James* 82)

As an open-ended text and a play with so many layers, *Exiles* can be understood in many more ways. That is why *Exiles* deserves to be discussed and analysed at a higher level and in a detailed manner.

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