

## ON THE FUNCTION OF ART IN MODERNISM

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### **Abstract**

This paper aims to discuss the function of art, particularly in Modernism. As introduction, two leading functions of art including personal and social are introduced. Modernism as a literary school is discussed and a brief explanation of its characteristics is presented. Attention is also paid to the approach of a Modern artist and Modern author to the function of art. To act in rather practical way, function of Modernist art is analyzed and investigated in an outstanding work of James Joyce, titled *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. To end with, the characteristics and function of “proper art” is discussed.

### **Introduction**

Art, according to Merriam Webster dictionary, is defined as the conscious use of skill and creative imagination especially in the production of aesthetic objects. Pointing out its origin in Old French from Latin “ars”, “art-”, also Oxford Dictionary defines art as the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power. With an eye to the mentioned definitions, art can be considered as a concept of which the oldness is almost as long as that of human-being. According to the latest paleo-archeological information, the oldest art has been created by humans during the prehistoric Stone Age, between 300,000 and 700,000 years ago.

A production of art, according to dictionary definition, is supposed “to be appreciated” for one reason or another. An artifact is produced possibly for the sake of being appreciated by a particular group ranging from merely the artist to a worldwide audience. In fact, the matter of appreciation could be considered as a factor putting influence and pull in the function of artistic productions. The function of art, however, has been the subject of many controversial discussions among people, and among scholars in particular. Though there might be various classifications for functions of art, they mainly fall within two categories: 1) personal, and 2) social. Needless to mention, so many other subcategories could be included in these two primary categories. At any rate, it would be almost incredible to claim that there is a clear-cut between the mentioned categories for functions of art.

The personal functions of art are the most thought-provoking to explain in any great detail. There are many of them and they also vary from person to person. An artist may create his work out of a need for self-expression or gratification. He may also want to communicate a thought or point to the audience. Additionally, the purpose of artistic creation could be to provide an aesthetic experience for both self —what I call internal audience— and others —what I call external audience—. On the one hand, an artistic work might have been meant to merely entertain external audience. For instance, environmental theatrical works are commonly following the purpose of keeping the audience agreeably occupied. On the other hand, there are a number of artistic works in which presentation of meaning for others is not the matter of concern at all.

In addition to its personal functions, art has also social functions when it addresses aspects of collective life, as opposed to one person's point of view or experience. A good instance could be the use of art in political contexts. Political art, skewed to whatever message, always carries a social function. In his *Das Materialismus problem*, Ernest Bloch (2000) asserted that after enjoying “the first taste of Marxist criticism, one will never again be able to stand ideological hogwash”. It should be noticed that art of social function on one side, and collective concepts such as culture on the other, are markedly dependent upon or even restricted to each other. Henry Mackay (2012) claimed that prevalent in art works, there is a shared ability to apprehend and ascertain the prevailing culture. It is in this sense they become a filter of cultural information, and reflexive with the world around them.

### **Art for art's sake: A wild 180 in 19<sup>th</sup> century**

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, literature and art experienced a shift which transformed the focus of attention from social concepts such as politics, religion and nationality to intrinsic value of art. As far as the forerunners of this shift are concerned, the first name which should be mentioned is that of a French poet, dramatist, novelist, journalist and art critic Pierre Jules Théophile Gautier. In spite of being a Romantic, Gautier remained a point of reference “for many literary traditions such as Symbolism, Decadence and Modernism” (Grant, 1975). *L'art pour l'art*, translated as “art for art's sake”, is credited to Gautier who was the first to adopt the phrase as a slogan. Indeed, this slogan was introduced in defiance of those who —from John Ruskin, to the much later Communist advocates of socialist realism— hold the mind-set that the value of art was to serve some moral or didactic purpose. Among the consequence of this notional shift was a remarkable alteration in functional respect of art and literature.

Influenced by the notion of art for art's sake, Modernist art came to observe new styles such as “Abstract Expressionism, Impressionism, Formalism (the formal elements of art), Cubism and Surrealism” (Gilbert, 1992). Many authors found themselves interested in this newly-emerged approach towards art among whom we can refer to Modernists like James Joyce, Frantz Kafka, Joseph Conrad and Samuel Beckett, and also an American Romantic like Edgar Allan Poe who argues in his essay (1980) that

*We have taken it into our heads that to write a poem simply for the poem's sake [...] and to acknowledge such to have been our design, would be to confess ourselves radically wanting in the true poetic dignity and force: — but the simple fact is that would we but permit ourselves to look into our own souls we should immediately there discover that under the sun there neither exists nor can exist any work more thoroughly dignified, more*

*supremely noble, than this very poem, this poem per se, this poem which is a poem and nothing more, this poem written solely for the poem's sake.*

### **Modernism and function of art**

“The term Modernism applied retrospectively to the wide range of experimental and avant-garde trends in the arts that emerged from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as artists rebelled against traditional Historicism, and later through 20<sup>th</sup> century as the necessity of an individual rejecting previous tradition” (Lakfjsdfsh, 2013). The specific features signified by Modernism vary with the user, according to Abrams (1999), but many critics agree that it involves a deliberate and radical break with some of the traditional bases not only of Western art, but of Western culture in general. Important intellectual precursors of modernism, in this sense, are thinkers who had questioned the certainties that had supported traditional modes of social organization, religion, and morality, and also traditional ways of conceiving the human self.

“At the heart of the Modernist aesthetic lay the conviction that the previously sustaining structures of human life, whether social, political, religious, or artistic, had been either destroyed or shown up as falsehoods or fantasies” (Baym, 2012). As the main characteristics of works in Modernism and literary texts in particular we can refer to their structure out of fragments, notable omission of conventional parts, inclusion of vivid segments and innumerable shifts. Art and literature of Modernism is not that of direct uninterrupted statements. In such kind, the expenditure of indirect lingual and metalingual forms is very common. Therefore, in Modernist literature symbols and images are very much preferred out of other literary figures. The inside world of the artist plus his personal preferences and desires consist thematic aspects of Modernist literary works in many cases.

In terms of function of Modernist art and literature, there are a few points worth mentioning:

- Seeing that Modernism focuses on art as it stands, it distances from social conventional concerns; therefore, Modernist art does not serve religion, morality and the like.
- Modernist art and literature are not to deal with a person “whose interests are of a material and commonplace nature, and whose mentality is formed of the stock ideas and conventional ideals of his or her group and time” (Nabokov, 1981). In short, art in Modernism has got more to do with Intellectualism rather than vulgarity and Philistinism. As T. S. Eliot (1916) said, “it is obvious that we can no more explain a passion to a person who has never experienced it than we can explain light to the blind”.
- Art, per se, is of high significance insofar as it is used as subject matter of a Modernist work at times. That is to say art is mainly at the service of art in Modernism.
- The extent to which truth, whether or not as a transcendental signified, plays role in literary shots of Modernists is of a great significance for author.

The artist's prerogative . . . is to emphasize, to underline, to blow up facts, distort facts in order to state a truth. All significant truths are private truths. As they become public they cease to become truths; they become facts, or at best, part of the public character; or at worst, catchwords. (Eliot, 1916)

The point of view of art and that of life are different even in the artist himself. Art flies around truth, but with the definite intention of not getting burnt. Its capacity lies in finding in the dark void a place where the beam of light can be intensely caught, without this having been perceptible before. (Kafka, 1954)

The times are so peculiar now, so mediaeval so unreasonable that for the first time in a hundred years truth is really stranger than fiction. Any truth. (Stein, 1945)

Apparently, Modernism does not serve to find or access any irreplaceable and unique truth. The idea of “subjective truths”, which later gave color to the Post-Modern philosophy and function of art, is nearly perceptible in Modernism. Truth, according to Modernists, exists beyond status quo and should be “beheld by the intellect which is appeased by the most satisfying relations of the intelligible” (Joyce, 1916). At all events, literature of the time finds itself more or less responsible to go for truth.

Completed in 1914, James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* depicts a perspective of the development of Stephen Dedalus from childhood until the time when he decides to leave Ireland as a way to keep independence and distance as a writer. As an account of the development of a young man’s mind, *A Portrait* is a bildungsroman, a form that conventionally concludes at a momentous point in the hero’s life, which signals the culmination of a process of self-discovery. (Babae, 2011)

The protagonist of *A Portrait* faces various forms and realizations of art from the very early stages of his life. However when all is said and done, Joyce categorizes art into two different types including 1) improper art, and 2) proper art.

Improper art, which James Joyce labels “pornography”, includes not only pornography in its literal sense, but also any kind of art that arouses emotion and persuade people to do something. Didactic art, best reflected in operational texts, is not a favorite type for Joyce and considered to be an improper form of art. It is asserted in *A Portrait* that

The feelings excited by improper art are kinetic, desire or loathing. Desire urges us to possess, to go to something; loathing urges us to abandon, to go from something. The arts which excite them, pornographical or didactic, are therefore improper arts.

It is worth noting that by such a statement, Joyce does not reject all and every kind of emotion. An art which arouses emotions of the audience merely due to its aesthetic characteristics is not considered “improper” in Joycean term. Such type of artistic work only raises a sense of artistic appreciation and joy. Proper art, as far as Joyce is concerned, is the one that fulfills the function of art; neither does it teach nor move you to do something you would not normally do. Joyce states that, set beyond material one, artistic joy is usually, if not necessarily, reached through communication and socialization. For instance, we read

*But when he had sung his song and withdrawn into a snug corner of the room he began to taste the joy of his loneliness.*

Or

*Though nobody spoke to him of the affair after class he could feel about him a vague general malignant joy.*

In few words, it is only artistic aspect of art, according to Joyce, that determines function of it.

## **Conclusion**

Although art has been accompanying human-being from many years ago, the viewpoints on the function of it have been a subject for modification from time to time. Having evaluating his situation, mankind has always had a made-to-order vision on the function of art. Art, however, has moved over the time in a pretty much humble manner. It has moved from a didactic loquacious speech of a bishop in a Catholic church to walls of painting gallery in Lafayette, and from laughter of a theater actress to a gloomy poem of a man after having his cigarette smoked. In ups and downs of this movement, art has always acted as a panacea for our pains. It has either attempted to help us either to discover a truth or heal the pain of a discovered truth.

In Modernist sense, an artistic work is assessed and praised for its aesthetic characteristics. For a Modernist artist specially a high one, being a conformist has neither meaning nor value. After all the previous literary movements and schools, Modernism came to realize that art itself needs a lot of care and attention. A High Modernist, James Joyce put a step further and paved the way for art to be at the center of literary focus.

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