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Doctors, disease and James Joyce

■ **The Irish author James Joyce is regarded as the greatest modernist writer of his time. His works, notably *The Dead*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* – are intensely autobiographic including meticulous descriptions of illness and states of health¹ – no surprise in view of Joyce's medical history and hypochondria. *The Dead* revolves around the tragic love of a doomed tubercular youth. *Ulysses* has a graphic description of Mary Joyce's death, a funeral and a birth; Stephen Dedalus, the character based on Joyce, attends a drinking session with medical students at the lying-in hospital just as Joyce had done as a student; references to syphilis, alcoholism and other illnesses abound.²**

Joyce's medical problems had a considerable influence on his life and therefore his writings. In particular, his eye problems, anxiety symptoms, alcohol abuse, and final illness deserve comment.

Joyce was one of at least 14 children, but a number were stillborn or died shortly after birth. Later a brother and sister died from typhoid. Illness and family problems weighed heavily on him. His daughter Lucia developed hebephrenic schizophrenia. After several remissions, Lucia was permanently hospitalised.

In the convivial, bibulous atmosphere of Dublin, so well portrayed in the drinking scenes in *Ulysses*, Joyce took to alcohol with enthusiasm. His consorting with prostitutes resulted in several episodes of venereal disease. Joyce always feared syphilis.³

During his time in Paris, Joyce's routine revolved around the café, where he observed the world and met friends. A food faddist, he did not like red meat or red wine but made up for this drinking white wine, which he likened to electricity. His daily consumption was often several bottles, consumed until the early hours of the morning – much to his wife Nora's disgust. He did not cope well with alcohol.⁴ A friend observed that drink went to his legs, rather than his head, with the result that he became ataxic. As he was so light, it was easy for friends to carry him home.

Joyce suffered badly from dental caries and had a number of teeth extracted in 1922 and 1923. The rest were extracted later, to be replaced by a set of full dentures. The pleasing appearance of a full set

of white teeth was remarked on in *Ulysses*, as was poor dentition and bad breath in others.⁵

Joyce developed iritis and had frequent episodes with conjunctivitis, glaucoma, episcleritis, synechia and cataracts. Attacks left him writhing on the floor, needing opiates for relief. Various treatments, including cocaine injections and leeches, were tried. Joyce first saw Dr Louis Borsch, then Dr Albert Vogt in Zurich. He frequently postponed appointments and consulted other doctors at will. In 1932, Vogt told him there was partial atrophy of the retina and optic nerve of the right eye.

Joyce had a series of operations in different countries over the next 2 decades, becoming 'an international eyesore, holder of the world amateur record for eye operations'. His fear of operations was intense and he would seek any excuse to delay a procedure. By the end of his life, his right eye was practically useless and there was 10% vision in the left eye.

In 1927, Joyce received arsenic and phosphorus injections for his eye problems. He complained for years about mysterious stomach pains,⁶ attributed to lack of food, stress, alcohol and 'colitis'. His friends assumed his thin, bird-like appearance was due to drinking. Joyce's physician, Dr Thérèse Bertrand-Fontaine believed the pains were psychosomatic, arising from 'disequilibrium of the sympathetic nerve'. Encouraged by her opinion, Joyce was profusely grateful, saying 'Doctors are the nearest to saints on earth'.

Syphilis – 'the great imitator' – can cause urethritis, iritis, conjunctivitis, arthritis and, occasionally, peptic ulcers. Dr JB Lyons, an authority on Joyce's medical problems, did not believe that he had syphilis.⁷ Joyce had an episode described as rheumatic fever in Trieste following a night spent in the gutter after drinking. Aching joints were prominent among his litany of complaints. His bent-over posture, said to resemble a question mark, occurs with ankylosing spondylitis. A more likely explanation for Joyce's eye and joint problems is a sero-negative arthritis⁸ such as Reiter syndrome.⁹

In 1940, war returned to Europe and the Joyce family fled to Zurich. Shortly after a duodenal ulcer ruptured, peritonitis developed and he had an emergency laparotomy. He woke up after the operation but had a relapse and died.¹⁰

A doctor's eye

Joyce combined great psychological insight with acute observational skills. In *Ulysses*, a novel about one day in the lives of three Dublin characters, (Stephen Dedalus, Leopold Bloom, and his wife, Marian or Molly Bloom), Joyce gives one of the great literary descriptions of grief:

'Pain, that was not yet the pain of love, fretted his heart. Silently, in a dream, she had come to him, her wasted body within its loose brown graveclothes giving off an odour of wax and rosewood, her breath, bent over him with mute secret words, a faint odour of wetted ashes'.

Bodily functions are described in detail. Sitting on a rock at Sandymount Beach, Stephen Dedalus picks his nose while trying to parse lines of poetry. Mr Bloom reads the paper on the toilet and struggles to control a fart after eating a cheese sandwich with a glass of burgundy. Lying in bed, Molly Bloom starts menstruating and has to use the chamber pot. There are vivid descriptions of sex acts, reflecting Joyce's determination to show every aspect of human life without restraint.

Literature, illness and medicine

In all field of medicine, the realisation that a narrow, technology based organic focus – the medical model – is insufficiently comprehensive and simply does not work effectively.¹¹ Doctors are looking to philosophy, anthropology, sociology and other disciplines to answer the question: 'What is it like to be human?' Nowhere else is this so well demonstrated as in literature. There are crucial links between stories and human understanding of illness. There is a growing recognition that literature has much to teach medicine. One need only look at the works of Conan Doyle, Chekhov, Maughan, Tolstoy – and anything by Kafka. Books such as *The Magic Mountain*, *The Bell Jar* and *Darkness Visible: a Memoir of Madness* are recommended in medical courses to give doctors an insight into the role of illness in the life of the person.^{12,13}

James Joyce was hypochondriacal, superstitious and phobic, especially for dogs, thunder, lightning, violence and water. His restrained and shy manner could have been due to social phobia. His fear of dogs was the reason he carried an ashplant walking stick in public. He refused to travel to America, despite numerous invitations, for fear that the ship would sink. His reluctance to wash ('All Ireland is washed by the Gulf stream') was probably a personal quirk.¹⁴

Joyce was not a good patient. His noncompliance and doctor shopping must have played a significant role in his morbidity. In his attitude to illness, Joyce was variously obstinate, self destructive, noncompliant or in denial; alternately, he was dependent, prone to rationalise and accept alternative explanations. In short, he was utterly human.

Joyce's work is rich in narrative, illustrating the human condition. In understanding his work, it is important to see how illness affected the life of this very autobiographical and all too human writer. In early adulthood, he was devastated by his mother's death from cancer. He drank excessively and could be an extremely difficult person. For a large part of his life, he had severe eye problems and was close to blindness.

To cope, he drank more, used denial, refused to follow medical advice and changed doctors in the hope of finding a magical cure. Driven to desperation by his daughter's psychotic illness, he believed he could save her by the sheer power of his love. Yet he never stopped writing and continued to produce literature of the highest order.¹⁵

In Joyce's books, there is all of life, and much of illness. Joyce's works not only provide superb illness narratives, they indicate how the experience of illness in the author influences the literary content. In writing them, Joyce gave completely of himself and left us a heritage that will stand as long as novels are read.

Conflict of interest: none.

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