

A reading of the theme of *Exiles* in the light of *The Myth of Sisyphus*

Abstract: James Joyce repeats in *Exiles* the theme of some familiar conflicts of his previous book (*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*) and his own life: the exile. The theme of exile would be sympathetic to Albert Camus, who in his explanatory essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, tells the reader about an exiled man who does endless work without a chance of being understood. This article aims to make a reading of the theme of exile in James Joyce's drama, *Exiles*, in the light of Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The article is going to present some relevant aspects of James Joyce's life to the topic; the relation of the myth to the theme of exile; as well as the reading of the theme of exile through *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

Keywords: exile, Sisyphus, Joyce.

Resumo: James Joyce repete mais uma vez o tema do exílio em sua peça de teatro, *Exilados*. Este tema já foi utilizado anteriormente pelo autor em *O Retrato do Artista quando Jovem* e em sua própria vida particular. O mesmo tema pode ser compartilhado com Albert Camus, que em seu ensaio chamado *O Mito de Sísifo*, conta a história de um mortal que é exilado de sua terra e tem como destino um trabalho árduo sem ter a chance de ser compreendido. Este artigo tem como objetivo fazer uma leitura do tema do exílio na obra *Exilados*, de James Joyce, tendo *O Mito de Sísifo*, de Albert Camus, como ponto de sustentação para a leitura. O artigo apresentará pontos relevantes sobre a vida de Joyce; a relação entre o mito e o tema do exílio; bem como a leitura do tema do exílio através da perspectiva do *Mito de Sísifo*.

Palavras-chave: exílio, Sísifo, Joyce.

Drama was one of James Joyce's passions. He began reading and attending to Ibsen's plays at the age of 16. One of Joyce's first written manifestations was about drama. In his *Ibsen's New Drama*, Joyce states some techniques he admires in Ibsen, and that he would follow in his own three-act play, *Exiles*, such as "in the three acts of the drama, there has been stated all that is essential to the drama", or "his analytic method is thus made use of to the fullest extent, and into the comparatively short space of two days the life in life of all his (Ibsen's) characters is compressed" (Joyce, 2000, p. 31). James Joyce is considered a difficult author to be read; conversely, his short stories and poetry are

rather accessible to the reader. The critics' opinion about *Exiles* is that it is too intellectualized for the understanding of ordinary audience. Besides, it is exposed in theatrical language, and, at the same time, lyrical as to the exposition of feelings (Assis Brasil, 1971), which would raise the audience's confusion due to the necessity of a high level of background information for the full comprehension of the play. The theme of exile is outlined in his play, a theme, which according to Assis Brasil (1971) would be sympathetic to Albert Camus, who in his explanatory essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, tells the reader about an exiled man who has to do endless work without a chance of being understood. Sisyphus ends up by losing his criteria of judgment and value. Camus explained the myth as a spiritual issue of the common man. Being so, Joyce is placed through the theme of exile in the level of existential search, in which he puts art as salvation, and the ideal excuse to escape from the absurd world, where there is no chance of being understood. This article aims to make a reading of the theme of exile in James Joyce's drama, *Exiles*, in the light of Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

James Joyce was born in Dublin in 1882. He was educated at the best Jesuit schools and then at University College. In 1902, after his graduation, he went to Paris. However, he was forced to return to Dublin because of his mother's death. In 1904 he met a young woman from Galway, Nora Barnacle, who he invited to go with him to the Continent. The couple lived in many places in Europe. Joyce left Ireland and returned five times; every time that his relation with his native land was improving he found new justifications to affirm the rightness of his decision of voluntary absence. His books were not likely to have been written in Ireland, due to the condition of provincialism and nationalism that the country was passing through; however, that there was a need to maintain his intimacy with his country even if by quarreling with it. He imposed to himself a self-exile but Ireland has never left him. In every text he wrote, there is the shadow of his country, and of its history. Joyce's books described several kinds of separations, his characters sought freedom, "which is also exile, by will and by compulsion" (Ellmann, 1983). Society, most of the times, was to be blamed. Joyce's characters were victims of the long tradition of conflicts in Ireland; on the other hand, Joyce was sure that he was what he was exactly because of the condition of his country and its environment, which gave him "a shape and a destiny" (Budgen, 2004).

By purpose or not, those characters who triumphed in their exile were unhappy to some extent, as if they conquered the right of being far and at the same time their land was part of them. But leaving the

land and succeed is going too far, unhappiness should be the price to be paid for such boldness. Joyce himself considered writing as a form of exile because it gave him the necessary detachment to measure what was part of him and what was acquired through foreign conceptions (English domination, and Catholic religion, for instance). Joyce organized his theme and the kind of hero he would put in his books. His conflicts; his search for individuality; his admiration for Parnell, Ibsen, Flaubert, Dante, Vico and Bruno (some of whom found exile as an answer as well); his own exile in Paris; all of these helped to create his conception of a young man giving up everything for art. Ireland became the labyrinth from which the artist could spread his wings and fly in search of distant lands where he could express himself. This is made clear in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, especially through the main character's name, Stephen Dedalus (after Christianity's first martyr and the Greek inventor). The same aspect was projected in *Exiles*. Once more the artist can be found, freedom is wanted, exile was searched. Joyce reassured the topic through his books (*Stephen Hero*, *A Portrait*, in some of his poetry, later in *Exiles*, and in some extent in *Ulysses*); yet again, the theme of exile is constant. Richard, just like Joyce, felt he had been forced into doing what he liked to do. In a letter to Nora, Joyce affirmed that "there is no life here (Ireland) – no naturalness or honesty. People live together in the same houses all their lives and at the end they are as far apart as ever" (Ellmann, 1983). An incredible amount of biographical details is found in *Exiles*. The themes of return, friendship, and betrayal could have been taken out of his life, even "the husband-hero was a figure through whom he could keep his own matured persona as the center" (Ellmann, 1983).

From his own experience a friend was someone who wants to possess your mind, because the possession of the body was forbidden by society, and betrayal was a proof of a friend becoming a disciple. Robert Hand (note the similarity of sounds: Robert and robber) was based on Gogarty, Cosgrave, and Kettle (all friends who ended up betraying Joyce); Richard was a projection of Joyce. Richard desires his wife to share his freedom; fidelity is clearly wanted, yet he cannot demand it from her. The certainty that a true relationship among people cannot happen is Robert's will for betrayal and Richard's doubts about infidelity. Richard is a searcher of freedom, in this case, he cannot control others' lives. The problem is that love does not have the same meaning for Bertha and Richard; the first has love as bonds, and the latter as freedom. Richard is in a "metaphysical exile" (Ellmann, 1983), due to the mind domination he has over Bertha and Robert's actions. The ques-

tion of doubt is present throughout the play since as Joyce put in his own words, "life is suspended in doubt like the world in the void" (Ellmann, 1983).

Exiles was written in 1914, Joyce wrote his play immediately after completing *A Portrait* and before undertaking *Ulysses*. It was published without much difficulty, in comparison to his other works, in 1918, and it was put on stage without much success. Joyce was interested in theatre since early age, his inspiration was Henrik Ibsen. *Exiles* is closed paralleled by Ibsen's *When We Dead Awake*, which is the alternating relationship of an artist, his wife, and another couple. The artist and his friend are put against two very distinctive women. According to Harry Levin (1993), it may be felt that Joyce became emotionally identified to his protagonist and that is the reason why Richard is far away from the other characters. Richard is too complex, the others are too simple. The other characters are anxious to understand Richard, still he is a stranger even to his wife at the end of the play. The place is Dublin and the year is 1912, which is the year that Joyce last visited Ireland. The plot deals with familiar circumstances (the mother's death, the son's elopement, infidelity, and betrayal); human and philosophical doubts (friendship, the possession of the other, and the artist's questioning about existence); the theme of exile is present in two different aspects, the first is the territorial exile (should Richard settle down in Dublin and accept a job as a professor of Romance languages at his old university or should he free himself in foreign lands?), the other is the "spiritual" exile, which is going to be exemplified through the Greek myth of Sisyphus.

Richard Rowan, as already said, dominates the play; he is an egocentric writer who has just returned to Dublin. It is not said to the reader (or the audience) why in the first place he and his "wife" left Ireland. This is one of the common enigmas of Joyce, in which this form of selecting a time in the lives of the characters like a picture is enlarged in *Ulysses*. In other words, there is life before and after the events; however, it is only possible for us to know what happens during the selected period of time. This can be the explanation of an ending without solution, one that can frustrate the reader. As Jung (1978) affirmed, Joyce fished out a microcosm in the chaos of history. Richard controls the actions of the other characters, even so, he is not satisfied, he goes from his wife, Bertha (based on Nora, and whose name derives from the word sounds of "earth" and "birth", giving Bertha the status of the symbol of the feminine principle of nurture) and Beatrice Justice (named after Dante's beloved), whose strong belief in her Protestant-

ism is rather similar to his mother's strong Catholicism. Both Beatrice and his mother were not able to be with someone. Those aspects together with Beatrice's better cultural level, brought Richard close to Beatrice, with whom he maintained a platonic relationship during the years Richard and Bertha were away; once more, Beatrice is a source of inspiration, like in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. According to Vizioli (1991), the challenge lies on Bertha, it is on her that the natural womanly power rests, it is her who needs domination. By being so different from both Richard and Beatrice, Bertha needs to be possessed. Richard wanted Bertha's fidelity, as a form of possession, something impossible to be conceived, since it is not possible to penetrate the inner soul or mind of the other, even if one is married or maintaining a relationship, even still possession is relative. Because of it, Richard pushes Bertha to Robert Hand, his friend and admirer. Bertha not only refuses to betray Richard (in fact this situation is another of Joyce's enigmas, for the reader cannot be certain of Bertha's fidelity by the end of the play) but also tells her husband everything that had passed between her and Robert. Richard does not believe her, truth does not free him and doubt about her behavior and sincerity is kept. The ghost from the past did not abandon him, at first he had to live exiled in another land *with* his wife, and after, according to Vizioli (1991), he had to live exiled *from* his wife. All characters are apart one from another, in the sense of not being sure of events from the past and also from the present, all of them are exiles in their own lives.

Before mentioning the myth of Sisyphus, it is important to remember that a myth is a kind of fiction, which conveys a psychological truth; in general, a myth is a story which involves supernatural things (Cuddon, 1998). According to Graves (2001), Sisyphus was a mortal, who was punished for betraying divine secrets, he was "very wise" (Greek meaning for the name) and could deceive the gods in his favor. Sisyphus was sent to the underworld and before descending, he instructed his wife not to bury him. On reaching the palace of Hades, he asked Persephone to let him go for three days since his presence there was irregular and he did not have the right to be there as an unburied person. Persephone granted his request and Sisyphus did not accomplish his promise of returning. The Judges of the Dead gave him an exemplary punishment. They showed him a huge block of stone and ordered him to roll it up the hill and place it at the top of the mountain. He never succeeded in doing so, for as soon as he almost reaches the top, he is forced back by the weight of the stone, which moves the stone down to the bottom of the mountain once more. Sisyphus is forced

to begin all over again, “though sweat bathes his limbs, and a cloud of dust rises above his head” (Graves, 2001).

Albert Camus wrote *The Myth of Sisyphus* in 1942, after the horrors of WWI and the nihilism which resulted from the war. The essay is an analysis of the contemporary diseases of recognizing the absurdity of human life. The central problem is *being* rather than *knowing*; people are not detached observers of the world, but people act in the world. The matter is that people are conscious about the openness of the future, which they can determine to some extent by their own choices and actions. This essay is placed among the writings of the existentialism, in which philosophically it is applied to a vision of the condition and existence of man, his place and function in the world, believing or not in God. It is the human choice of what he does or does not that essence is given to his existence. Human experience found chaos instead of order after two huge wars. The problem is that man did not create nature and it gives him the feeling that he is not integrated in the world. Being so, the experience of man in the twentieth century is a fragmented one, man is a stranger searching for values and his own identity. Subsequently, the problem is neither in man nor in the world, but in the connection between them, the problem is *to be* in the world. According to Bizello (2003), through the process of feeling a stranger, man feels uncomfortable in the world; his relation with the world is of separation, since his inability of going further into the traditional concepts that were created by others outside his reality. The individual is alone, the era of the gods has passed and man is responsible for his acts, he is free. His essence derives from the results of his acts, of what he has done and of what he has chosen not to do. However, freedom is not total due to the fact that man lives in society, which is inserted in a specific time and space. Man lives according to the rules and traditions of the place he lives in. At this moment, man takes notice of how restricted his actions are due to the restrictions imposed by society over his existence. One aspect Camus wants to emphasize with *The Myth of Sisyphus*, through the philosophy of the Existentialism, is that man feels anguish because he has to live his life without support. He feels alone and free, responsible for his own destiny. When man becomes conscious of it, he is divided, fragmented due to his free will to choose. Anguish comes from freedom; anguish comes from having a choice.

Existence implies the relationship among men, nature, things, and their multiple relations, which are always dynamic. In all human existence there is the other, which can be a person, a thing or a situation.

A conflict takes place because of the other, for instance the case of love. Loving involves the possession of the other. According to Neto (2003), Bertha receives the status of “something to be possessed”, a person who can be given or taken. Again the similarity of sounds between the words *robber* and *Robert* is used by Joyce as a form of suggestion.

Richard, *takes his hand*: Who knows? Do you understand what it is to give a thing?

Archie: To give? Yes.

Richard: While you have a thing it can be taken from you.

Archie: By robbers? No?

Richard: But when you give it, you have given it. No robber can take it from you. *He bends his head and presses his son's hand against his cheek*. It will be yours always. That is to give.

(*Exiles*, p. 561)

The conflicts continue as in the myth, which evokes the sense of origin, human beings need to understand their origins. There is the desire of knowing the beginning of the world and of life, as if knowing would mean being independent from everything else. This desire of truth generates anxiety due to the impossibility of certainty of everything that happens. When it comes to relationships the desire of knowing is associated with fear of betrayal; consequently, it is associated with sexual infidelity. Sex reveals the fragmentation of man, since he ends up by showing himself as incomplete being. Man needs the other to complete the meaning of his existence (Deane, 2003). Betrayal is revealed in *Exiles*, and it merges powerfully in Joyce through the history of Ireland, which was first invaded because of betrayal; Parnell was also betrayed; the Irish wanted the use of their own language and culture, instead, they were betrayed into what English represented (domination); and even his relationship with Nora was impregnated with fear of betrayal. That is the reason why Joyce stood up to the point that art is beyond betrayal (Deane, 2003). As Camus (1980) affirms, Sisyphus is the absurd hero, as in *Exiles*, Richard is the absurd man, who above all is an artist. The capacity of seeing the world as it is and as it should be allows people to look at themselves under new lights, as free agents, who can make choices and embody values. Things can only be valued through the capacity of realizing their existence. This feeling of absurdity is metaphorically the place of exile. There is nothing left in a world without values or life without meaning. The absurd is present in everything people do. Through the example of the artist, who is honest because he does not follow traditional rules, he follows what he believes. It becomes clear that the absurd man is more detached than the

ordinary man due to his detachment he is aware of the possibility of being open to experiences. For this reason, he does not need to explain or justify his life and behavior. The honesty of the absurd man does not lie in his obedience to the rules of society, but in the respect of the rules he sets for himself. Art can show the artist the absurd that life is, not by merely telling a story, but creating a whole new universe. And it is exactly in the act of creating in which the tension is broken due to the fact that the absurd man lives as if he was fully committed to what he is doing. There is no judgment nor criticism, in fact, the absurd man does not seek explanation. This is what Joyce and Camus did when writing *Exiles* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, respectively. They did not want to convince the reader of their arguments. Camus (1980) did not engage in any sustained argument, he discusses nothing less than the meaning of life itself. Joyce presented through a short period of time a picture of some interconnected lives. Both are presenting a world without order, a place where people can only live with a feeling of uncertainty; however, the feeling of absurdity is found when it is realized that the only certainty people can have is the lack of unity of the world, and their inability to find answers within the world.

Camus (1980) confirms that the only comprehension a man has is one of difference. In this way, man retracts himself because he feels threatened by the disconnection of the world, provoking conflicts. It is as if man is in exile. Once more, Camus (1980) affirms that the feeling of absurdity is due to the consciousness man acquires of his condition as human being. Absurdity is born when man starts to think; society is not responsible for that, the true condition comes from man and his conscience. This fact can explain how Richard feels in relation to Bertha, his feeling of being wounded in his soul comes from the fact he cannot possess what is different. Bertha makes him move in the world, make choices. The situation of friendship and betrayal is opened, yet Richard is unable to stand for a position (whether telling Bertha what to do, or giving his opinion about the situation). Conversely, Richard is only able to communicate with Beatrice, who is much alike him, and who does not demand a choice or a position to be taken.

Richard: I am wounded, Bertha.

Bertha: How wounded, dear? Explain to me what you mean. I will try to understand everything you say. In what way are you wounded?

Richard, *releases his hand and, taking her head between his hands, bends it back and gazes into her eyes*: I have a deep wound of doubt in my soul.

Bertha, *motionless*: Doubt of me?

Richard: Yes.

Bertha: I am yours. *In a whisper*. If I died this moment, I am yours.
Richard, *still gazing at her and speaking as if to an absent person*: I have a wounded soul for you – a deep wound of doubt which can never be healed. I can never know, never in this world. I do not wish to know or to believe. I do not care. 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 nakedness – for this I longed. And now I am tired for a while, Bertha. My wound tires me.
(*Exiles*, p. 625-6)

Camus (1980) associates the feeling of absurdity with the feeling of exile. Human beings instinctively feel that life has some sort of meaning or purpose. Individuals feel at home when their actions are ruled by this assumption, and at the same time they feel like strangers in a world without reason, which exiles men from home (in the sense of the place people live in or their home as their being – soul, mind, heart) or the meaning of existence.

Jealousy of the past, an important tribute to the past, is present in *Exiles*. There is a kind of nostalgia of the old times, manifested by all characters. The problem is that the past is defined throughout the play, the reader does not know and does not have all elements to figure out the doubts about their past, and such factor allows the out-coming of new doubts about the present actions of the characters. The reader can only infer the answers but not be truly sure of what was real or what was the creation of imagination, which generates a kind of frustration. This is exactly what happens in real life; doubts generate frustration by the denial of the possibility of certainty. Camus (1980) affirms that people can only live with this kind of negative certainty, but only if people reach some degree of awareness that anything more than the search for certainty is about to fail. All the characters in Joyce's drama are exiles from the golden age of their youth. The action of the play is concentrated, taking place in just a few days. The characters are tormented by their past, the conflict is an inherited one, the past is alive (Ireland's past, Joyce's past as well as Richard's). Richard is the main victim of the conflict; he is informed of the truth, which raises his anguish. The desire for freedom is the want of becoming free from guilt, a consequence of a past action. Richard's longing for freedom, in truth, is a longing for fidelity. However, it is not possible to tell Bertha about it. According to Neto (2003), Richard is too afraid of being betrayed and from all the conversations about freedom during the play, it is implied that no one is really free to make choices. Richard keeps the other characters under his surveillance. It means that he uses his intel-

ligence to control others. His theory of possession of the other incorporates the discourse of honesty to prevent betrayal.

Bertha: Do you not wish to know – about what happened last night?

Richard: That I will never know.

Bertha: I will tell you if you ask me.

Richard: You will tell me. But I will never know. Never in this world.

Bertha, *moving towards him*: I will tell you the truth, Dick, as I always told you. I never lied to you.

Richard, *clenching his hands in the air, passionately*: Yes, yes. The truth! But I will never know, I tell you.

Bertha: Why, then, did you leave me last night?

Richard, *bitterly*: In your hour of need.

Bertha, *threateningly*: You urged me to it not because you love me. If you loved me or if you knew what love was you would not have left me. For your own sake you urged me to it.

Richard: I did not make myself, I am what I am.

Bertha: To have it always to throw against me. To make me humble before you, as you always did. To be free yourself.

(*Exiles*, p. 616-17)

Richard affirms that Bertha and Robert are free, but, through the words above, it is implied that Richard is the agent who frees others. In Joyce's notes for *Exiles* (2003), he affirms that the play is about exile rather than betrayal, because of it Mahaffey (1990) concludes that all doubts of the characters come from their deep isolation. Joyce uses the technique of silence to enlarge the sensation of the characters' isolation. Neto (2003) comes to the conclusion that the relation between the title and the play is what is left to each one of the characters as well as to the reader – exile; to Richard, it remains the eternal doubt about Bertha's fidelity; and to the reader, it remains a sense of frustration. It all happens due to the seduction that Joyce imposes throughout the play to end it with an anticlimactic ending. For the characters as well as for the readers all possibilities of knowledge are denied.

Philosophers from all times based their views on examples drawn from everyday life. The same happens with drama. Philosophers or playwrights aim to convey their theories into the comprehension of people. Camus and Joyce have a lot in common when the *Myth of Sisyphus* and *Exiles* are put together. "Nothing is told us about Sisyphus in the underworld", says Camus (1980), and nothing is said about Richard in his underworld (what was his true reasons for what happens in the play). As for the myth, the reader can only observe the effort of that person to accomplish nothing, the same can be said about Richard. However, the final message of both texts is positive. Camus (1980)

concludes that the most important moment of Sisyphus' fate is the moment of the return, that pause in which he faces the stone rolling back to the bottom of the mountain and faces the torment which will never end because that is the hour of conscience. Each time Sisyphus leaves the heights of the mountain, he is leaving behind the age of the gods, he is being "superior to his fate". Each time he has the strength of repeating this act, he is stronger than his punishment. Camus (1980) affirms that everything that is performed with sorrow, can also be performed with joy. Shadow and light, happiness and the absurd are atoms of the same universe. When the absurd man says *yes* to life, he will be the master of his days. "The rock is rolling", says Camus as a metaphor for life continues, Sisyphus must go on, negating the gods and raising the rock over and over. And it is possible for Sisyphus to admit that all is well. In *Exiles*, the positive aspect is showed through the end of the play. As it was mentioned before, the time chosen to frame the play is a period of time selected from the lives of the characters. However, the play ends with Bertha's speech. It is common for Joyce to end his work with female word (*Exiles*, *Ulysses*, and *Finnegans Wake*). Molly's "yes" shows the conviction that *yes* she has spent one more day in her life, her past lives in her present days in the form of her stream-of-consciousness. All of Joyce's characters are exiles from their own land, more than that, they are exiles in their souls, because they recognize that things have the meaning and value they give them and situations change from moment to moment. Everyone is going to die and we are aware of it. Decisions are taken without guarantee of success. We are all condemned to freedom.

Bertha: Forget me, Dick. Forget me and love me again as you did the first time. I want my lover. To meet him, to go to him, to give myself to him. You, Dick. O, my strange wild lover, come back to me again!
(*Exiles*, p. 626)

Bertha is culturally inferior to Richard; nevertheless, she is the character who sees more clearly. She is able to recognize that Richard is her husband but he is still a stranger. She is able to face the fact that the world moves on, whether you are prepared or not. Bertha is an exile herself, and Richard has exiled her, put her aside of his life. The message is positive, not in the same form as Molly did, but in a direct line to Richard, telling him he is welcome and that she is willing to face life with him again. As Joyce affirmed in *Ibsen's New Drama* (2000), "life is not to be criticized, but to be faced and lived" (p. 48). Man is an exile who has to live; in spite of the comprehension he has from the

world he lives in, or the reality which surrounds him. He is obliged to live within himself and build his reality as a place that he can understand. It is possible for him to be free and make choices in a place already known. Man cannot possess what is different, it generates anxiety and makes him exile from his country or his own being. The world is absurd and it enlarges the feeling that to be free is to be loosen in the universe, wandering because one is alive, not for a purpose or ideal. People have to find their own meanings and apply them to their values; judging and learning, to make life a place worth living. In *Exiles*, Richard takes exile as a place of protection, which would safeguard his independence, in reality he tries to live alone and escape from what is different from him. In truth, it is all illusion due to the fact that conflicts will exist no matter where a person goes; the other will always be part of one's life, no matter what. Richard tried exile after exile (exile from his mother, from his country, from his wife), he attempted to runaway from challenges, and, in consequence, from choices. The feeling of exile is felt inside, and it is generated due to the position one takes in the world.

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