The Motif of Motion in ‘Ulysses’, ‘Lolita’ and ‘On The Road’
by Sandra Sumonja

"It is not so important to live, it is important to sail!" (Pliny the Elder)

1. Introduction

Popular culture is one of the inevitable concepts in the postmodern era and one of the cornerstones of 20th and 21st century. In this paper, we will examine some of the main features of modern life that reflect trends in popular culture, such as the motif modes of movement, daily life, home and dining. Throughout examples we will see just how modern and postmodern literature is imbued with popular trends and how strong the relationship between reality and its reflection through creative literary work is.

What becomes popular- is what is written about, what is given far greater attention that conservative and traditional and as such- a primary feature of everyday life it finds its expression in the novels like Joyce’s ‘Ulysses’, ‘Lolita’ by Vladimir Nabokov and ‘On the Road’ by Jack Kerouac.

1.1 The motif of journey and its development in modern times

Throughout history, the journey was a crucial factor in finding a suitable place for the founding of settlements, discovering unfamiliar areas and the creating better living conditions. It influenced the people who set off to strange and unknown to be considered extraordinary. The old stories and songs testify about countless adventures and intrepid heroes. In the literary tradition, there is also the parallel stating that movement is never a simple change of residence; it is a challenge, a true indicator of one's character, the temptation and the condition for spiritual development. A true representative of this understanding of movement and travel is Homer's Odyssey.

However, many centuries later, the ever present motives of wandering and searching do not stand for great achievements and bold adventurous expeditions anymore. With dying of the heroic era all its features have disappeared. Heroes are cowards, their maids are unfaithful, grotesque monsters from the enchanted caves are moved to the zoo.
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In literature, as in life, the patterns inherited from the past are no longer found to match the present created by a new generation. As the literature is the mirror of life, it gathers new influences so that the deconstruction of the myth takes place. Contemporary form has reduced old patterns to absurdity— that becomes the very essence of the new era; heroes recede and disappear, leaving the path open to the anti-heroes. It must be noted that the two terms (hero and antihero) are not binary opposition, there is no relationship between good and evil, but a shift of values and views on what is considered heroic.

An antihero is not always fair, brave and fearless moral giant. Unlike its predecessor, the antihero has a far greater range of emotions, intimidations and doubts. He's the new Odyssey, he is nobody (old Greek οὖτις) and at the same time god Zeus (old Greek Ζεύς) of his own little world. The ideal description is provided in the following passage: "To the ordinary man.

To a common hero, a ubiquitous character, walking in countless thousands on the streets. In invoking here at the outset of my narratives the absent figure who provides both the beginnings and necessity I inquire into the desire whose impossible object he represents. What are we asking this oracle whose voice is almost indistinguishable from the rumble of history to license us, to authorize us to say, when we dedicate to him the writing that one formerly offered in praise of the gods or inspiring muses? "(De Certeau, 1984, XI)

The questions imposed are what the new heroes are like, who represents aspects of change and Movement and what they signify today.

In the 20th century, when modern technologies and inventions are gaining greater proportion of people's lives, movement - the act of traveling, is getting a different dimension than it had before. We live in a time of rapid, turbulent, radical and constant changes in society. The movement itself becomes a goal. The need for change is not a result of the being intrepid and courageous anymore, but a characteristic of the modern era. "Marginalization is no longer a feature of minority only; it has become massive and pervasive characteristic; that is non-structural mass cultural activity [...]" (De Certeau, 1984, XVII)
As time passes, movement is faster and more important. The entire Western world is slowly starting to look like an agitated hive that is migrating in different directions. People are less satisfied with their present stated, more eager to change and full of internal strife to engage in search for some new areas, events, environments, and opportunities. Why is it like that today? What does modern man seek for?

What galvanizes him and how does he survive?

The answers will be revealed by scrutinizing the motif and elements of movement in novels Ulysses by James Joyce, Lolita by Vladimir Nabokov and On the Road by Jack Kerouac.

How does the need for movement appear? Throughout all three books the answer is hunger.

Leopold Bloom, the hero of Ulysses lives his life deprived of love, recognition and affection. Joyce ironically introduces him as freshly woken up and seemingly trivial, hungry and eager to have breakfast.

‘Mr. Leopold Bloom ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls. He liked thick giblet soup, nutty gizzards, a stuffed roast heart, liver slices fried with crust crumbs, fried hencods' roes. Most of all he liked grilled mutton kidneys which gave to his palate a fine tang of faintly scented urine. Kidneys were in his mind as he moved about the kitchen softly, righting her breakfast things on the humpy tray. Gelid light and air were in the kitchen but out of doors gentle summer morning everywhere. Made him feel a bit peckish. ’ (Joyce, 2012, 67) in the initial description Leopold highlights his favorite dishes, thus putting emphasis on his appetite. Further reading reveals that there is the word hungry used nine times in different conversations and situations.
In the case of Humbert, the protagonist of Lolita, movement first appears as a way to calm and overcome internal unrest, brought by hunger and desire for illicit connections. In order to numb his appetite he decides to go to the cold Arctic regions of Canada. This was among his first attempts to get rid of the terrible yearning that had engulfed him and made him its slave.

‘My health was miraculously recovered despite fantastic emptiness and boredom. Surrounded by vegetation such as dwarf willows, lichens, degassed and, I suppose I have been cleaned…under a completely translucent sky I felt strangely distant from myself. …no temptation. ‘(Nabokov 2004, 39)

Frustration caused by socially unaccepted sexual preferences drives this hero numerous and various relocations. He states that by movement away from his drives he moves away from his own identity. However too weak to lead a life of a hermit and insidious stalker, he grabs the first opportunity to fulfill his fantasies.

‘Distracted father went on saying that they will go away shortly after the funeral for his sensitive daughter and he will do his best to give her a good time in a completely different environment, maybe a trip to New Mexico or California - of course, if he survives. "(p113)

Aware that only far from the current residence he can enjoy the presence of Lolita, Humbert cleverly devised an excuse for leaving without return. Thus, as soon as the form of his relationship with Lolita has been socially accepted he does not hesitate to make his selfish hidden desires come true.

In the novel, On the Road, "Sal embarks on a quest to fulfill a dream of going to the West. The first reason he states is the hunger for new landscapes and sceneries. After a personal failure and monotony that seemed devastating, he created a strong need for a thorough change."
The Motif of Motion in ‘Ulysses’, ‘Lolita’ and ‘On The Road’
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‘I first met Dean not long after my wife and I split up. I had just gotten over a serious illness that I won’t bother to talk about, except that it had something to do with the miserably weary split-up and my feeling that everything was dead. With the coming of Dean Moriarty began the part of my life you could call my life on the road. Before that I’d often dreamed of going West to see the country, always vaguely planning and never taking off. Dean is the perfect guy for the road because he actually was born on the road, when his parents were passing through Salt Lake City in 1926, in a jalopy, on their way to Los Angeles.’ (Kerouac 2005, 5)

The word vague reflects the passive state of modern man and the modern culture of constant change and movement gives the hero another perspective of why should fulfill his quite random and poorly defined plan. For him, the departure has significance for his creative work as well.

‘All my New York friends were in the negative phase while Dean stormed through society eager bread and love, I heard his call and he could make out a new horizon. I was a young writer and I Wanted to go ….‘(P.13). it could be said that the hunger is archetypal reason of each journey.

Today, that hunger is spiritual and requires getting to our inner being and bringing out our true nature.
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1.3 Physical hunger - modes of modern times

What happens with the basic, prehistoric and recently even marginalized urge to satisfy one’s craving for a meal?

What is used to quiet the sounds of a hungry stomach?

If one considers these questions less important, remember that all the heroes in all stories always took food and drink to them befitting; ambrosia for the gods, the red wine for Marko Kraljevic (a folklore hero).

How do eating habits reflect social changes? Leopold Bloom eats at home first. However we can see a strange thing - he himself makes breakfast and not his wife. In earlier periods, many trees were cut down in order write and print tons and tons of paper about virtuous, humble, God-fearing and dedicated ladies who serve their beloved, strict, uptight and righteous men. Joyce sends his hero into the kitchen while Molly is lounging in bed. This image deconstructs the idea of a despot husband and maid wife. Family is not what it used to be. Whether this a positive or negative change shall be left for further discussion of Amish circles and feminist associations
The Motif of Motion in ‘Ulysses’, ‘Lolita’ and ‘On The Road’
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Following Bloom’s steps we see him in many inns; he does not rush home to have home made meal with fine cutlery because he knows that will not find it. Hunger forces him to visit inns and pubs. He wants to have lunch at one of the places that are along the way of his itinerary. Along the way becomes characteristic of the modern era meals.

, A hungry man - angry man ... Duke Street. There we go. You need to eat something. ”(Joyce, 2012, 180)

Not only that inns with cooked meals do not provide the warmth of a family home atmosphere, but they are so smelly and dirty that hungry Blum loses appetite.

‘Smells of men. Spaton sawdust, sweetish warmish cigarettesmoke, reek of plug, spilt beer, men's beery piss, the stale of ferment. Parish gorge rose. Couldn't eat a morsel here. Fellow sharpening knife and fork to eat all before him, old chap picking his tootles. Slight spasm, full, chewing the cud. Before and after. Grace after meals. Look on this picture then on that. Scoffing up stewgravy with sopping sippets of bread. Lick it off the plate, man! Get out of this.

PARHe gazed round the stooled and tabled eaters, tightening the wings of his nose.”(Joyce, 2012, 181)

These pubs serving stews and cooked meals become dining rooms to many men who either do not want to or do not have anyone to go home to.
Dissolving family ties and commitment, meals, that were once an integral link between the family members, now take the form necessity and nuisance done in haste. In Lolita, there are many situations that thoroughly reflect the modern culinary trends such as diets, collecting light recipes and romantically set table. However it all stops when Humbert and Lolita set off and start living, one might say, a gypsy way of life. A meal ceases to be a ritual designed for enjoying the smell and taste; it is neither healthy nor nutritious nor performed within a family. Aware of the plot, it is clear why Humbert and his young companion do not pay special attention to their eating habits. Cooked meals are not present here; from Eating along the way they go to a more modern category- to fill you up and to be tasty.

Dining rooms cease to resemble places where one can eat with delight. Except for lame attempts to make dining room a pleasant place, it is clear that the ritual itself has a pathetic form.

‘... It was a spacious room with a pretentious pious murals depicting enchanted hunters in various positions and states of enchantment amidst colorful society colorless animals, dryads and trees. A few scattered old ladies, two priests and a man in a sports jacket were ending the meal in silence. Dining room is closed at 9 waitresses dressed in green desperately hurry to get rid of us. [.............]she slammed dessert table on the - a huge slice of cake with cherries for the lady, and her patron vanilla ice cream. "(Nabokov 2004, 135)

She is not a lady but a child, Humbert is not a knight in shining amour but a deviant stepfather. Description of premises and guests creates a feeling of nausea and discomfort. Not only this is an unusual depiction of two people having dinner, but not one detail fits the conventions that previously in literature existed and society.

Unlike previous heroes, Sal chooses movement as a way of life only because of pleasure and adventure. Sal’s modern, nutritionally sparse diet is mainly based on fast food. Through his pace of travel and food choices we only imagine how his hectic travel is.
The Motif of Motion in ‘Ulysses’, ‘Lolita’ and ‘On The Road’
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‘I ate another apple pie and ice cream; was that virtually everything I did during the earlier times
ate - the food was delicious and of course, calories.’(Kerouac 2005, 18)

This type of diet has been present for decades all around the globe. The number of calories is
inversely proportional to the price of a meal. High energy provided by calories and cheap price
are the main advantages of the immense fast food world. What happens is that there are no few
meals but only one, sometimes even in the form of dessert. Taste and the number of calories
become the main attributes in the selection of food. Food, restaurants, and pubs have become
inevitable. The irony is that the progress of civilization brings out the primeval need for
devouring and overloading.

Along the way, instant/fast food and takeaway have become the pop culture
prerogatives for a meal.

1.4 The motion of the modern era

In the novel 'Ulysses' our Odysseus starts his epic journey on foot. As a complete contrast to the
former legendary ships or faithful horses. This kind of movement opens a dimension because
seemingly random wandering around the city can have epic proportions since the real journey
takes place in one’s mind.

‘Think you’re escaping and run into yourself. Longest way round is the shortest way
home’(Joyce, 2012, 393)

In his ingenious way, Joyce portrays the character’s stream of consciousness, thus crating a real
modern Odyssey. Although there are no Cyclops, sweet voiced mermaids or dangerous
sorceress, Leopold Bloom struggles all the time with his just as strong inner demons. He is
struggling to understand the world around him, to find love and beauty in a bleak environment
and to preserve his unfaithful Penelope. It happens on foot, without a sword, unaccompanied,
and almost without hope, he makes superhuman efforts to walk familiar streets and find the
meaning to it all. And what is the greater goal?
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Finding the meaning of everyday life and its purpose has become the Holy Grail of modern times.

Talking about Lolita and Humbert, the speed of movement has a great influence on their decisions.

Their car becomes a sort of Aladdin’s flying carpet.

‘Then began our extensive travels throughout the United States. Soon I began to all other types of tourist accommodation guess functional motel clean, neat, safe nooks, ideal places for sleep, argument, reconciliation, insatiable illicit love.’ (Nabokov 2004, 161)

Whenever he feels danger, and whenever he feels like his aspirations are threatened, Humbert starts the car and leaves with his companions.

Along with the old function to get somewhere, the function of running always is more emphasized here, which is precisely the main characteristic of Humbert’s way of travel.

For Sal the most important thing is to arrive to a desired location as soon as possible. However, buying a bus or a plane ticket does not make much sense to him because, even though he is eager to get to the West, hitch hiking as a way of travelling is as important as the goal of arriving itself. My first ride was a dynamite truck with a red flag, about thirty miles into great green Illinois, the truckdriver pointing out the place where Route 6, which we were on, intersects Route 66 before they both shoot west for incredible distances. Along about three in the afternoon, after an apple pie and ice cream in a roadside stand, a woman stopped for me in a little coupe. I had a twinge of hard joy as I ran after the car. But she was a middle-aged woman, actually the mother of sons my age, and wanted somebody to help her drive to Iowa. I was all for it. Iowa! Not so far from Denver, and once I got to Denver I could relax. She drove the first few hours, at one point insisted on visiting an old church somewhere, as if we were tourists, and then I took over the wheel and, though I'm not much of a driver, drove clear through the rest of Illinois to Davenport, Iowa, via Rock Island. And here for the first time in my life I saw my beloved Mississippi River,
The Motif of Motion in ‘Ulysses’, ‘Lolita’ and ‘On The Road’
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dry in the summer haze, low water, with its big rank smell that smells like the raw body of America itself because it washes it up. (Kerouac, 2005.17)

Hitchhiking, bumping in the back of the truck with a bunch of strangers, yawning and drowsiness next to a talkative truck driver, rain and lack of money, are all necessary and desirable experiences for the sake of adventures and expanding horizons. Just as the protagonist himself says, after a period of illness and divorce, he wanted to change something in his life.

This kind of scenario is becoming increasingly popular in the world. A journey is nowadays considered as a spiritual development and healing process. Unlike Bloom, who is in a way forced to deal with inner issues on the move, Sal is boyishly looking forward quest and adventure, so instead Odyssey’s troubles we have a hero who roams the landscapes of his country led only by the idea of having fun. Volatility, as one of the key concepts of modern culture, is best reflected in his hitch hiking quest.

2. Conclusion

The motives of movement and constant change have become part of life style. Individuality in popular culture gained a much more important role than it had before. A sense of community is fading away. By traveling and movement we can give more meaning to our lives even if we are as lonely as Bloom or childishly curious like Sal.

Someone’s peculiar lifestyle requires constant changes just like Humbert’s. But motion is getting faster and more important with every day. It affects all aspects of modern life.

Home receives the form of the hotel, a place where you sleep over and have breakfast. Career and personal pursuits guide us, in the morning, modern heroes just rush out of the house, making sure that their keys are in their pocket, than spend a day in meaningless conversations. Just like Humbert they put all their efforts into an unconventional quest for the sake of a relatively short-satisfaction. Some of them like Sal wonder around, in a pursuit of a childhood dream and living in a Peter Pan adulthood. Hunger for life’s pleasures, boredom and dissatisfaction gush relentlessly seeking quick and simple solutions.
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Ulysses, Lolita and Othe Road suggest that fast and voracious world is movement in front of our eyes.

Bibliography


