Disparity in Imperialism

James Joyce’s *Ulysses* presents imperialism through the eyes of the indigenous people who are subject to its dominance and control whereas George Orwell’s *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius*’s first part, *England your England*, presents the author’s reasoning behind why a deep sense of patriotism should unite the citizens of the English empire and serves as his commentary on their current attitudes. At the brink of the Second World War, Orwell reminds the English people of the glory that all citizens of a powerful imperialistic force share. The global practice of powerful nations establishing and maintaining empires by “[controlling] the effective political sovereignty of another political society… [through] force [and] economic, social or cultural dependence” (Michael Doyle) leads to differences in how ideologies develop in the two nations involved. Comparison of these 20th century accounts highlights the different established viewpoints in the respective communities and viewpoints authors of the time propagate. This contrast helps understand the basis by which people identify themselves and their nations in a world view. A nation in this sense is an aggregation of people bound together by culture or a central socio-economic ideal. These beliefs influence how people look upon and characterize citizens of other nations. The disparity in Joyce’s portrayal of the indigenous mindset and Orwell’s aspirations for British nationalism displays imperialism’s ability to not only create stark ideological divides but also influence behavior and attitude in different nations.
James Joyce’s use of the literary tool of exaggeration allows him to illustrate the feelings of the native people living under the dominance of an empire. Employing exorbitant details to portray the scene at the wedding of a grand high chief ranger facilitates in describing not only the sentiments of the indigenous people in reaction to the report but also the high regard in which the imperialist elites hold themselves. Lord Catletown’s report on the fashionable en masse read by the protagonist, Leopold Bloom, focuses on the comprehensive list of gentry in attendance and the bride who “looked exquisitely charming in a creation carried out in green mercerized silk… the scheme being relieved by bretelles and hip insertions of acorn bronze” along with the “sisters of the bride [wearing] very becoming costumes in the same tone” (Joyce 327). The economic capability to present themselves in such an extravagant manner allows the ruling class to assert psychological superiority over the citizens of the imperialized nation. Joyce’s attention to detail and overemphasis on the materialistic possessions allow the reader to become aware of the economic divide in an imperial empire. The posh portrayal of wealth weakens the morale of the indigenous people as they become aware of their country’s economic dependence on the imperialists. This dependence is an integral part of establishing and maintaining an empire as per Michael Doyle’s description.

Joyce further expands on the suppressed mindset of the people under imperial rule by presenting an inflated list of resources that the natives have become deprived of due to the dominance of the foreigners in all spheres of their society. The people of his nation who have continuously turned a blind eye to the gradual loss of Irish tribes and identity in the wake of imperialism enrage the citizen. He expresses this outrage when he’s talking with Leopold Bloom by comprehensively listing “[their] potteries and textiles…wool that was sold in Rome… [their] flask and damask from the looms of Antrim and [their] Limerick lace, tanneries and white flint
...” along with other lost resources that will soon make them “as treeless as Portugal” (326).

Despite the desires of having full harbors and opulent trade again, the lack of resources and loss of their “best blood to France and Spain” (330) lead to a lack of faith in their own nation’s ability to be independent and sovereign again. Through the use of excessive amplification, Joyce enables the reader to clearly comprehend how indigenous people subjected to imperial rule have become convinced of the imperialists’ right to be in power.

Irrespective of whether the citizens of the empire back home agree with the ideals projected internationally, the power of nationalism establishes a similar mental attitude throughout the empire that helps dissolve all moral restrictions. Orwell’s aspirations lie in compelling his countrymen to be bound by a sense of nationalistic pride attributive to the world wide success of the British Empire. Orwell explains this virtue by focusing on the power of a patriotic approach by stating that “[the citizen] is serving his country, which has the power to absolve him from evil” (Orwell 11). The overwhelming strength of patriotism enables one to justify any actions that he believes are important for the advancement and stability of the empire. Loyalty to their nation that is shared amongst all people of that nation on at least some subconscious level can motivate individuals to gain a “certain power of acting without thought” (14). Rational thought and reasoning are overlooked when growth of the empire and spread of socio-economic ideals are at stake and citizens readily step over their self-imposed moral boundaries.

The apparent difference in Joyce’s emphasis on the suppressed mindset of the indigenous people subjected to imperial rule and Orwell’s focus on promoting nationalistic sentiments in the citizens of British Empire presents a stark gap in how each group looks upon the world and what power, if any, they believe their nation has in the international sphere. The British Empire and
the English people are not bound by any restrictions in their pursuit for wealth and power which leaves the indigenous people in foreign lands without any hope for being absolutely void of bondage. They can only aspire for better living conditions under the empire. Joe, the citizen and Bloom contemplate the lack of justice in the British Empire and show their disdain when they comment that “the great empire they boast about of drudges and whipped asses. – On which the sun never rises. – And the tragedy of it is … they believe it. The unfortunate yahoos believe it” (Joyce 329). Over time, the indigenous groups come to accept that sovereignty over their own land no longer applies and they bring themselves to the conclusion that this outright external control is only part of life, an aspect over which the individuals have no power. The ideal of freedom no longer exists as a real possibility. This disparity in the way the two parties involved view imperialism is better understood by comprehending the underlying mindsets that authors of the time explore. A comparative look at literature of the time can help understand how the sentiments of a nation’s citizens evolve along with the nation’s international ventures and diplomatic standing. This sheds light on and helps explain the difference in human behavior and attitude from country to country.

Works Cited
