

Wondering, Wandering Serendipitously

Kevin Wright

‘Serendipity’ is an interesting word. You would almost think it was one of those strange invented words in *Finnegans Wake* by James Joyce, who so loved to split the etym. Alas, it is not one of his creations.

That honor goes to Horace Walpole, an English author. Walpole stumbled upon the fairy tale *The Three Princes of Serendip* and years later misremembered the story in a letter to a friend. Such as it is, the word ‘serendipity’ was created, in a way, serendipitously. It means finding something accidentally while looking for something else.

My own serendipitous experience occurred when a friend sent me an email with the following words in the subject line: "I don't know if this would interest you." It did.

The email contained a link to an article in *The Guardian* about a new audio recording of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. That recording in turn, led me to an even more intriguing website: <http://www.nggprojectucd.ie/>

Gerardine Meaney of University College Dublin doesn't wait for serendipity to be delivered to her inbox. She seeks it out.



Meaney and her team of literary experts and computer scientists have analyzed forty-six examples of Irish and British fiction from 1800 to 1922.

Their project is a comparative social network analysis. This work opens new trails for investigation in literature, and they explore “how writers and readers have imagined the connections between people in their society and turned those connections into plots.”

Professor Gerardine Meaney, School of English
Photo Source: Mike Liffey copyright of Real Smart Media

They have made some fascinating discoveries. For example, there are over nine thousand characters in the forty-six texts that they have looked at so far. Six hundred and sixty-four of those characters are servants, or about 8%.

Can those figures help literary analysts draw conclusions about plot, nation, genre, or gender? They certainly can. And Meaney's team is excited to further their understanding of how servants were treated in that era, and understand

how they fit into the societies of their respective novels. Take a look at the website's introduction video—my paraphrasing doesn't do it justice.

The website will also lead you to the new audio recording of *Portrait* that my friend thought would be interesting to me. The father and son team of Barry and Sam McGovern are the voice of Stephen Dedalus at different phases of his life; and their rendition of the text is all the more poignant because of their father/son bond.



Actors Barry and Sam McGovern
Photo Source: John Howard copyright of Athena Media

Barry McGovern has had roles in *Game of Thrones* and *Braveheart*. Sam McGovern narrated the 2015 Dublin stage adaptation of *Portrait*

You can choose to download the book or listen to parts of it here:

<http://www.joyceportrait100.com/the-audiobook/>

In the case studies section of Meaney's website you will see how a social network analysis can help analysts chart and visualize the depths of Stephen's loneliness in *Portrait*. This demonstrates how isolated a burgeoning artist must feel, at least according to James Joyce, during his evolution towards becoming said artist. This is fascinating information for any Joyce or literature fan.

This field of analysis has become increasingly popular in recent years. I recommend that you visit the site, read the blog, and see where serendipity takes you. I hope that you will be as enchanted by its content as I am.