

FEATURE

CHRISTMAS 2011: DIAGNOSIS

Was James Joyce myopic or hyperopic?

The standard biography says the great Irish Modernist writer was nearsighted, and the claim has echoed down the years. But what's the evidence?

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James Joyce (1882-1941), considered one of the pre-eminent writers of the 20th century, achieved international renown with *Ulysses*, the ground breaking and highly controversial work of fiction published in 1922. Joyce's delicate health and, in particular, his failing eyesight were a constant liability in his life and continued to affect and complicate the composition of his work.

Various biographers, partaking of the general myth of the purlblind Joyce, put forward his supposed myopia in early youth as a first sign of his naturally weak eyes. For instance, Richard Ellmann, in his seminal biography *James Joyce* (1982), stated that Joyce's "nearsightedness was soon to make him wear glasses."¹ Around 1888, A H Benson wrote out Joyce's first eyeglass prescription, purportedly for myopia, "his only physical blemish."² Since Ellmann made his assertion, numerous literary critics and biographers of Joyce have reiterated the claim of Joyce's myopia. The supposed refractive status of the young Joyce, furthermore, has been repeatedly associated with his "acutely myopic" fictional alter ego, Stephen Dedalus, as well as with the theme of social myopia in Joyce's early fiction.³

Surprisingly, no one before has either noted the thick convex lenses Joyce manifestly wears in photographs, or attempted to call into question his alleged myopia by means of this photographic evidence. Due to "foolish" advice not to wear glasses, given to the young Joyce by his school medical officer around 1894, Joyce's spectacles are remarkably absent from existing photographs of him from before 1905.¹ From 1905 onward, when his eyes were examined in Trieste and he began to wear "pince-nez glasses on a string for reading,"⁴ Joyce's thick convex lenses can be discerned in photographs either from a lateral view or through the magnifying effect of his glasses (fig 1⇓). According to Irish writer James Stephens, for example, Joyce's spectacles "made his blue eyes look nearly as big as the eyes of a cow—very magnifying they were."¹

Apart from the circumstantial evidence of photographs and descriptions, the 1932 prescription for his glasses, written out

by Alfred Vogt, his ophthalmologist at that time, and reproduced in Lyons's *James Joyce and Medicine*, establishes the fact of Joyce's hyperopia (fig 2⇓). Effectively ruling out the claim of his (initial) myopia, both prescription glasses are positive lenses with a refractive power of +17 dioptres. Around 1917, Joyce's refractive status had only been +6.5D.⁵ Since Joyce had undergone a cataract extraction in his left eye in 1924, the resulting aphakia had to be corrected by 11 dioptres.¹ By 1932, his right eye had developed a total cataract, further complicated with uveitic secondary glaucoma.^{6,7} To compensate for the heavy lens of the left eye, Vogt, instead of risking an operation on the complicated cataract, chose to prescribe the same optical correction in both eyes—hence the German *gleichgewichtig*, which means "balanced," "with equal weight"—to avoid the asymmetric weight of a unilateral aphakic spectacle.

Hyperopia is a common refractive disorder that has been overshadowed by myopia in the public perception, vision research, and scientific literature.⁸ The present case is a historic example.

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1 Ellmann R. *James Joyce*. Oxford University Press, 1982: 26, 64, 333, 568.

2 Lyons JB. *Thrust syphilis down to hell and other rejoiceana*. The Glendale Press, 1988: 26.

- 3 Kenner H. Circe. In: *James Joyce's Ulysses: critical essays*. Hart C, Hayman D, eds. University of California Press, 1977: 353.
- 4 Joyce J. *Letters of James Joyce*. Vol 2. Ellmann R, ed. Faber and Faber, 1966: 81.
- 5 Pound E. *Pound/Joyce: the letters of Ezra Pound to James Joyce*. Read F, ed. New Directions, 1967: 101-2.
- 6 Lyons JB. *James Joyce and medicine*. Dolmen Press, 1973: 200-1.
- 7 Ascaso FJ, Bosch J. Uveitic secondary glaucoma: influence in James Joyce's (1882-1941) last works. *J Med Biogr* 2010;18:57-60.
- 8 Grosvenor T. The neglected hyperope. *Am J Optom Arch Am Acad Optom* 1971;48:376-82.

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Figures



Fig 1 James Joyce with his Windsor eyeglasses.

[Image: Lipnitzki/Roger Violett/Getty Images]

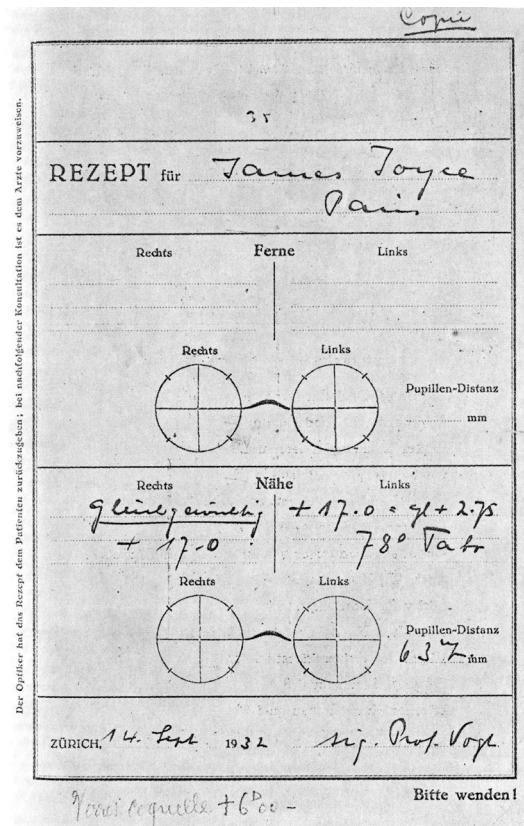


Fig 2 1932 prescription for Joyce's eyeglasses, written out by Alfred Vogt. Lyons JB. *James Joyce and Medicine*. Dolmen Press, 1973