O, Rocks!
The Comedy of *Ulysses*

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There's many a true word spoken in jest
-Molly Bloom

When we read, it is important to think about why we are drawn to certain stories. A book can relieve our loneliness, or it can help us reach feelings that even the words themselves cannot describe. But, when I think of why I read *Ulysses*, it is because it's damn funny. In fact, the more I read *Ulysses* the more straightforward the message seems. All narrative aspects point toward the comic hero, the new Odysseus, Leopold Bloom. In a conversation with his friend, Frank Budgen, James Joyce says of the Greek hero "he is a complete man as well—a good man."[1] Joyce certainly treats his protagonist with kindness, and it's no question that he offers us Bloom as a positive and humorous lesson for our lives. Bloom is humble, caring, and inquisitive. He takes pleasure from everything he can but maintains his money and decency; he is a prudent hedonist. It would be easy enough to say— "Be like Bloom!" and leave it at that, but Joyce's many styles prove difficult or even impenetrable to first-time readers. The form of *Ulysses* unfortunately seems to tangle up any simple message. The styles themselves are not only idiosyncratic to the characters' minds but to Joyce's authorial hand. Jointly, the hot air of critics has ballooned the topics of mythology, nationalism, society, religion, art, science, and more recently, gender, colonialism, and sexuality. Inflated so, these topics have overshadowed the novel's most worthy aspect—the comedy. The Irish writer Declan Kiberd does however, supply the pin for these balloons. In his book *Ulysses and Us* he objects to the loftiness of these topics as they appear in the novel. Such loftiness led to what he determines to be the capture of *Ulysses* by academia. After the mid-twentieth century, he states, that as far as the institutions of academia

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[1] Frank Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of 'Ulysses'*, (Oxford University Press, 1991), 17

were concerned, "democracy was no longer seen as the sharing in a common fund of textual knowledge, but as providing access to this or that super-educated grouping."[2] As a result, *Ulysses* has been exalted to epitomize high modernism in all its exclusivity and snobbery. Though Kiberd attempts to wrestle from academia and restore *Ulysses* to the public as he believes Joyce intended, it's important to note that Joyce's own contemporaries propped up the book for its extreme seriousness as well. The original reviews paved the way for the ills of which Kiberd speaks, and thus its comedy has been left behind.

To echo Derek Attridge, I do not care about the changing demands or trends in Joyce studies because "all I can do is identify the kinds of criticism that seem particularly valuable *to me*, *here and now*, because they answer to what I perceive as the needs of our time."[3] My goal is to help dissolve the massive mythical pretentions which have crystalized around the book by showing that the narrative of *Ulysses* itself acknowledges and rejects these notions through the power of comedy. This will require us to take a look over the tradition of *Ulysses* criticism from its origins to today. We read old books for what they can teach us and criticism should be no different, so there is value in returning to foundational scholarship. According to Michael Gillespie, doing so gives us a "more sophisticated grasp of the nuances of epistemological developments… of numerous current assumptions now seemingly resolved into fixed points of view."[4] More recent criticism, on the other hand, still stews in the deconstructionist mode. The skill to locate and prod textual issues has coincided with the inability to detect irony. So, looking over the scholarly history of *Ulysses* we find that the approaches, whether non-political to

[2] Declan Kiberd, *Ulysses and Us*, (Faber and Faber Ltd, 2009), 10.
[3] Derek Attridge, *Joyce Effects on Language Theory and History*, (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 19.
[4] Michael Gillespie, Introduction to *Foundational Essays in James Joyce Studies*, (University Press of Florida, 2011), 3.

feminist, psychoanalytic, mythological, or historical, all disregard the comedy of *Ulysses*. It is not just in the novel's intellectual meditations alone that we find its richness. The book's intimidating form does not just demand a measure of psychological rigor but exudes an excess of human vitality for us to enjoy. *Ulysses* is, of course, not free from the tangles of politics, but there is also nothing revolutionary about its content by the standards of modern criticism. *Ulysses* is a sympathetic exploration into bourgeois life from which we, the bourgeois readers, can learn a lot.

Old Criticism and Mythology

Beginning broadly, the best way to start rethinking a book is to think about its classification. Since its creation, the genre of *Ulysses* has been controvertible in scholarship. After its initial publication, many readers did not know what to make of it. T.S. Eliot did not consider it a novel at all. By mid-century, and after the publication of Joyce's schemas which outlined the plot of the book, many critics considered it a kind of non-genre. The Joycean, Hugh Kenner, states the *Ulysses* is an "*ad hoc* genre" placing it in the same category as *The Waste Land*, *The Cantos*, and *Molloy*.[5] Of course, due to the book's length in prose, and the general perception of its poignant tone, it has settled into the category of a standard modernist novel sharing a shelf with *To the Lighthouse* and *The Sun Also Rises*. But style and tone are at times incongruous, which has led to debates regarding the overall message *Ulysses* intends to deliver to the reader. Many have read its sad situations and contemplated them in dire seriousness. The heavily produced form and prose have allowed the novel to be marked as pretentious,

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[5] Hugh Kenner, *Ulysses*, (George Allen & Unwin, 1980), 3.
[The works are by T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Samuel Beckett respectively]

overbearing, and self-important. Joyce's comedic techniques have gone mostly unappreciated, and most have neglected to acknowledge or have misinterpreted the humor that the author has packed into it. However, these incongruities are in fact an ingredient of what makes the novel brim with humor. Joyce packs in so many jokes narratively and textually that *Ulysses* is most meaningful and best enjoyed as a comedy. Nearly every aspect of the novel is funny. Its style, form, themes, plot, and characters all play together in a grand riot. To read *Ulysses* too seriously is to misread. Reading it first and foremost as a comic novel benefits a reader, scholastic and common alike. Turning page to page in revelry vitalizes the text by deflating the grandiloquence which has smothered it for so long. Comedy is serious business.

So how have our readings gone wrong? An example of the exasperated *Ulysses* reader is not hard to find. Many pieces of 20th century Joyce criticism acknowledges Carl Jung and his infamous essay on *Ulysses*. The passage one will frequently find transcribed in journals and books is this:

> "Everything is desouled, every particle of warm blood has been chilled, events unroll in icy egoism. In all the book there is nothing pleasing, nothing refreshing, nothing hopeful, but only things that are grey, grisly, gruesome, or pathetic, tragic, ironic, all from the seamy side of life and so chaotic that you have to look for thematic connections with a magnifying glass."[6]

Poor Jung had the misfortune of giving one of the first analyses of the book which inadvertently built himself into a strawman for the next hundred years of criticism. He offers the flagrant argument that *Ulysses* is meaningless, and worse yet, boring. It is no surprise he has since become the punching bag of Joyce scholars. A rebuttal to him can be as simple as saying that he

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[6] C. G. Jung, "Spirit of Man, Art, and Literature," *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, 2014

'didn't get it' (Indeed, any lover of the novel will say the book was years ahead of its time). This is mainly because his statements are incompatible with the goal of New Criticism which worked to affirm the text of its aesthetic value. Jung's description of *Ulysses* served an anachronistic modernist purpose, that is, to shake off the sentimental values of Romanticism, and mope around in nihilistic pessimism.

Opposite Jung in opinion was T. S. Eliot who had nothing but praise for the novel's aesthetic power. In his review, "Ulysses, Order, and Myth," he relates the creation of *Ulysses* to a scientific discovery. Its mythical form is "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history."[7] While Jung at least admitted that he didn't finish it, we can only wonder whether or not Eliot read anything but the episode titles. Eliot here is feeding his own obsession with recreating mythology. He published *The Waste Land* the same year (1922) that Joyce published *Ulysses*, and the literary community saw the year as a touchstone of world culture, an achievement of mythological proportions. Ezra Pound wrote to H.L. Mencken saying, the Christian era ended with *Ulysses*, "You are now in the year 1. P.s.U." (post scriptum *Ulysses*).[8] Eliot no doubt saw the publication as auspicious given his hang-ups, that its place in this time gives some sort of shape to a post-war world, but he seems to have missed the joke of Joyce's mythical method. The framework around *Ulysses* is the *Odyssey*, but it is the vast difference in scale between the two works that we see that the whole project is steeped in irony. This is not to say *Ulysses* is a self parody, such as other mock epics like *Rape of the Lock*. Joyce took this task

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[7] T. S. Eliot, "Ulysses, Order, and Myth," (The Dial, 1923), https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/review-of-ulysses-by-t-s-eliot-from-the-dial.
[8] Ezra Pound, "Letter 186," *Letters of Ezra Pound: 1907-1941*, ed. D. D. Paige (Faber and Faber, 1951), 240.

very seriously, but the text is self-aware enough to resist a completely unamusing interpretation of its form. Joyce scales up an average summer day to an absurd size. The proposition that the shabby streets of Dublin are anything like the mythical Mediterranean is inherently funny. Even with the *Odyssey* as the template for the novel's narrative, the actual correspondence between the two works is rather light. Cramming the plot threads together with one-to-one correlations would suffocate a book, and what we'd get would be nowhere near as interesting as the *Ulysses* we have. The mythological elements are so gently applied that they can go unnoticed with casual reading. The direct allusion is, of course, the title, but other than that, the episode names only appear meta-textually. Even Stephen Dedalus, who actually bears the name of the Greek craftsman, plays the role of Telemachus instead. It is a small story told in a big way. Instead of dwelling on mythology as such, Eliot would have better applied himself considering it in different terms than the form to make his point. "If [*Ulysses*] is not a novel," he says, "it is simply because the novel is a form which will no longer serve."[9]

But *Ulysses* is a novel, and mythology doesn't need to be so lofty. A mythology develops due to the timelessness of the story, and a story's significance can be determined by whether or not it can be shared and appreciated across regions and generations. It is true, however, that Joyce committed fervently to formal metaphors. In his March 20th letter to Frank Budgen he explains the style of his most over-produced episode, "Oxen of the Sun." After a long passage describing his "nineparted" technique to reconstitute the entire history of the English language, he reveals his main metaphors: "Bloom is the spermatozoon, the hospital the womb, the nurse the ovum, Stephen the embryo."[10] The result of delivering a weighty master-craft in "Oxen" ends

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[9] Eliot, "Ulysses, Order, and Myth."
[10] Richard Ellmann, March 20 1918 James Joyce letter to Frank Budgen in *James Joyce* (Oxford University Press, 1959), 476.

up as outlandish rather than pretentious. The very idea that Joyce would have the nerve to write this episode in over thirty different styles is absurd. Our author is mindful of this too; at the end of his letter, he gives a self-aware solicitation to Budgen—"How's that for high?"[11] Joyce's own comic energy pulses through this particular episode at one point transforming Leopold Bloom into a dragon-fighting knight, and later, transforming the whole scene into an 18th century period play, just to note two moments. In fact, the upbeat energy which allows Joyce to imagine formal and stylistic possibilities speaks more to the power of mythology than the form itself. Joseph Campbell, a great fan of Joyce, gives our author an ancillary position for his formulations on mythology. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, he discusses the nature of tragedy and comedy. "It is the business of mythology proper, and of the fairy tale, to reveal the specific dangers and techniques of the dark interior way from tragedy to comedy." When the hero completes his journey, "life no longer suffers hopelessly under the terrible mutilations of ubiquitous disaster, battered by time, hideous throughout space; but with its horror visible still, its cries of anguish still tumultuous, it becomes penetrated by an all-suffusing, all-sustaining love, and a knowledge of its own unconquered power."[12] So if *Ulysses* is indeed mythology, Campbell's grand rhetoric explains the novel's project better than Eliot does. The stakes to be found in *Ulysses*, however high or low as they might be, communicate to us the transfer of tragic energies into comedic ones.

According to the philosopher John Morreall comedy, like tragedy, attempts to reconcile life's painful incongruities, but comedy "embodies an anti-heroic pragmatic approach" to these problems." [13] "In place of *warrior virtues*, it extols critical thinking, cleverness, adaptability, and

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[11] Ibid.
[12] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, (MJF Books, 1949), 29.
[13] Here, 'heroism' has the traditional militaristic connotation.

an appreciation of physical pleasures like eating, drinking, and sex."[14] No better description could there be for the man Leopold Bloom. As our primary POV through *Ulysses*, Bloom displays each of these characteristics and we see their various degrees of effectiveness throughout the day. Though Bloom epitomizes these characteristics, he is not the only one to engage the world this way. The characters Buck Mulligan, Simon Dedalus, and Molly (with the sad exception of Stephen), think like comic heroes to an extent. George deForest Lord picks up on this idea in *Heroic Mockery*. He humorously pits *The Waste Land* against *Ulysses* as antithetical epics, distinguishing the former as a conservative mock-epic and the latter as an example of 'heroic mockery.'[15] He uses this phrase to farther draw Ulysses away, not only from tragedy, but from mock-epic as well. Mock-epic as Lord understands it, "Mobilizes the glories of classical and biblical myth and legend to expose the spiritual bankruptcy of the modern world."[16] The use of this form implies that the ways of the past are superior, the irony of 'epic mimesis' being to ridicule the story it tells. Mock-epic is, in a sense, the same mode of derisive humor that Buck Mulligan wields. Lord states that "Joyce's mockery implies a more complex and tentative attitude toward tradition"[17] and, (sounding similar to Morreall), "the predominant values of the heroic warrior—glorious, egotistical, and tragic are qualified and… superseded by a new kind of heroism—patient, social, and, in away, fundamentally comic."[18] To the extent that *Ulysses* is an epic in prose, it uses the characteristics of an epic to gaily inspire the possibilities of greatness rather than sneer at the decline of society.

[14] John Morreall, "Humor," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford University, 2016). https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/humor/
[15] George deForest Lord, *Heroic Mockery*, (University of Delaware Press, 1977), 13.
[16] Ibid, 14.
[17] Ibid, 15
[18] Ibid, 17.

Recent Criticism and Comic Tradition

After the modernist critics came the mid-century critics such as Hugh Kenner, Harry Levin, and William Noon who began the real in depth analysis of Joyce which cemented him into the canon. Their close reading work has provided timeless and invaluable insights, yet, perhaps feeling the need to legitimize Joyce, they treat the author's books with stern reverence. However, pretending Joyce's works are not funny is like pretending *Comedy of Errors* is a tragedy. More current criticism has been no less earnest about the stern significance of *Ulysses*. Cheryl Herr calls the work a "masterpiece of semiotic pseudo-comprehensiveness; it is a model of cultural processes and materials. And it is the nature of this model, what it encompasses and what it marginalizes or excludes" that interests her.[19] The big ideas she focuses on are interesting and certainly active in *Ulysses*, but her analysis, like the mid-century critics, downplays the evident levity in the novel. The legitimacy and professionalism of Herr is without question, but despite this, she still appears alongside the critic Kathleen McCormick in the collection *Molly Blooms*. In her essay, McCormick looks back at the development of critical perceptions of *Ulysses*, in particular, the episode "Penelope." She uses what has become the predictable modern method in criticism, what Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus call "symptomatic reading" which is to self-righteously reveal and diagnose textual illnesses.[20] For instance, according to McCormick, critical interpretations of Molly Bloom have been historically sexist not because the critics are sexist but because they have worked through sexist historical contexts. "Reading" she says, "is

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[19] Cheryl Herr, "Art and Life, Nature and Culture, *Ulysses*," *Joyce's Ulysses: A Larger Perspective*, ed. Robert D. Newman and Weldon Thornton (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1987), 20.
[20] Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 1.

an interdiscursive act that occurs within changing determinations that affect both texts and readers."[21] Fair enough if a little verbose, but her argument fails as soon as she intentionally chooses to not discuss the actual content of *Ulysses* and instead to focus on the novel "in relation to the material antecedents and consequences of a position within a given historical moment." McCormick chooses to not talk about the book that she's talking about, and instead pushes her reader through a maze of unrelated agendas. Most egregiously, she admonishes past critics who explain that "particular interpretations can simply be proved to be "wrong" with reference to "the text."[22] McCormick's issue is that some critics use facts to build their arguments. To intentionally reject the book is to reject the purpose of literary work. Furthermore, a professional cannot effectively criticize a term like "the text" by putting it in sarcastic quotation marks like it's not real. Unfortunately, the trend to ignore the text is still very active in Joyce scholarship. In an essay that was actually published, C. David Bertolini "explores the notion that Bloom dies" at the end of the novel.[23] After, suggesting that the protagonist does indeed die, he ties this to implications involving a Dan Brown style code that will unlock Joyce's secrets about metempsychosis. He makes this up and only consults the text to overreach beyond his limits. He makes the mistake of inventing something that might sound interesting to a journal at the expense of what the text actually says.[24]

Though many of the historicist critics do make decent critiques of some of the more pessimistic whimsies of Hugh Kenner and his contemporaries, work like theirs is ironically

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[21] Kathleen McCormick, "Reproducing Molly Bloom," *Molly Blooms*, ed. Richard Pearce (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 19.
[22] McCormick, 18.
[23] C. David Bertolini, "Bloom's Death in Ithaca," *Journal of Modern Literature, Vol 31*, (Indiana University Press, 2008), 2, http://www.jstor.org/stable/30053267.pdf.
[24] Bertolini is now the NDSU chair for landscape and architecture. Let's hope his buildings are constructed on better foundations that his arguments.

traditional in that it makes the timeless mistake of still addressing *Ulysses* too gravely. Zack Bowen in *Ulysses as a Comic Novel* offers a refreshing alternative to these kinds of interpretations. Though very different from each other, Bowen suggests that critics like Jung and Eliot up through Herr and the likes of McCormick, have, through one way or another, neglected what he sees as the novel's most important aspect. Joyce's contemporaries rejected the comedy outright. The critics that came next in the '50s and '60s, though appreciative of its rich aesthetic value, were not interested in the comedy. And Bowen's contemporaries "have tended to ignore the implications of Joyce's comedy"[25] Overall he argues that critics have "confused the novel's lack of a traditionally tragic moral purpose with their even grimmer view that the absence of a lofty moral direction implies that Joyce abandoned any hope of the generally pleasant sentience that life affords."[26] In other words, the fact that the novel's morality is supposedly ambiguous does not suggest that it is meaningless or even pessimistic; what this contention proposes is that there was a change in the the role of the novel, that *Ulysses*, specifically, was something different. It was not the next generation of 19th century romances, the likes of which are parodied in the episode,"Nausicaa." Nor is it the ugly Dada-esque anti-novel where "causality and finality have neither place, nor meaning."[27] And it is certainly not the great colonialist project as Susan Bazargan suggests is compounded in "the modern female colonial identity."[28] Just because the novel does not explicitly inherit the formalist structures of the past does not mean it is an abandonment of morality, and just because it has complicated characters in complicated

[25] Zack Bowen, *Ulysses as a Comic Novel*, (Syracuse University Press, 1989), xi.
[26] ibid, xii.
[27] C. G. Jung, "Spirit of Man, Art and Literature."
[28] Susan Bazargan, "Mapping Gibraltar," *Molly Blooms*, ed. Richard Pearce (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 119.

situations does not mean that we can tangentially apply superficial pseudo-leftist theories to it either.

Bowen argues that *Ulysses* embraces a “more realistic comic philosophy” casting aside the “pretenses of the high moral dilemmas of tragedy for the normal never-ending problems of everyday life, which occur in a cycle that is as rewarding and triumphal as it is frustrating.”[29] Placing the book within the genre of comedy ties it directly it to a different, more appropriate literary tradition. Leaping back into the 18th century, we find notable similarities to *Ulysses* in the great English comic novels. The old Americanist Richard Chase remarks that The English Novel has often been “comic, but often too, in that superior form of comedy which approaches tragedy.”[30] Chase means that the English tradition makes comedy from dire situations. Lifelong happiness or life itself are often at stake in their plots. The stakes of *Ulysses* too can be dire, but in the most common ways of suburban life. While the wit of Swift and the charm of Dickens no doubt appear in *Ulysses*, it is the ribald flamboyancy of 18th century novels which shines throughout *Ulysses*. The 1700s was the century of genesis for the novel form. Because the form was so new, a standard style had not yet become conventional; therefore, it was a time for experimentation and creativity. New rules and broken rules were the way forward, but the mode the novel eventually settled into was straightforward realism. The 18th century’s novelistic big bang parallels the modernist movements of the early 20th century. The efforts of modernist novelists were to reject the formal rulebook and reconstitute the novel as creatively as they could. We can think of the 1700s as working toward assembling the novel and the 1900s as

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[29] Bowen, xii.
[30] Richard Chase, *The American Novel and its Tradition*, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1959), 2.

breaking it down. It's of little surprise that similar motivations lead to similar results, and Joyce repurposes joyfully the schemes of Laurence Sterne in particular.

Joyce's connection to Sterne has been noted by several critics including Zack Bowen. We know Joyce read Sterne because the satirist's unique style appears in "Oxen of the Sun." In the episode, Joyce mimics the writing of Sterne's novel, *Tristram Shandy*, which is made up of sharp divisions of time and a constantly forking narrative progression implemented for comedic effect. We see these techniques appear throughout *Ulysses*, but as far as the overall formal structure it is in the breaking down of narrative expectations that the novel's align. *Ulysses* will often take long irrelevant digressions. Bowen points toward the two novels' interest in extraneous details. "The tedious exploration of various irrelevancies," he states, is comic because of its "very disconcertation of expected narrative chronology and relevance."[31] The ten page, two language excommunication in *Tristram Shandy* (which too is interrupted) looks identical to the extensive catalogs in the episode, "Cyclops."[32] The novels use this method to humorously exasperate the reader with the thoroughness of their triviality. Sterne's narrative mechanism which gets us to these places is a proto-stream of consciousness told by a first person narrator. Though the flowing narration has the same comic purpose in both novels, the overall thematic purposes do not align. As Bowen notices, Sterne uses stream of consciousness to ironically toy with reflexivity. In other words, it is a novel about the protagonist trying (and failing) to write that very novel. In *Ulysses*, however, we never get the idea that a character is "debating the construct of his own work."[33] Despite Joyce's prominent artifice, *Ulysses* never slips into a commentary on itself or any corny meta-humor.

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[31] Bowen, 105.
[32] Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1980), 122-131.
[33] Bowen, 106.

For Bowen's definitive reframing of *Ulysses* as a comic novel, he does ultimately run the risk of overcorrecting. In accepting *Ulysses* as a comedy, he denies that there is much darkness in the humor at all, or the humor, in a sense, overpowers the sadder parts of the book. As a result, he ignores and downplays the tragedy that occurs throughout. The two thematic elements of tragedy and comedy are not at odds, but one in the same. The two require one another. As such, *Ulysses* generates its humor through problems and struggles that have varying degrees of urgency. To transform what is uncomfortable and morally dubious into laughter is the work of a true comedian. The very fact that Joyce troubles morality is what makes *Ulysses* funny. The fine line for the artist, however, is to not allow his irreverence to slip into mean-spirited mockery. Joyce's ironic treatment of the Dignam's funeral, Molly's infidelity, Stephen's depression, and Bloom's ineptitude does not undermine any emotional importance inside and outside the fiction; it instead provides a pleasurable way to understand and cope with these issues.

John Morreall contrasts tragedy and comedy saying that "in comedy there are more characters and more kinds of characters, women are more prominent, and many protagonists come from lower classes. Everybody counts for one."[34] In this fashion, Joyce ensures that *Ulysses* maintains a democratic attitude. In the episode, "Wandering Rocks," the narration releases, for the first time, from the minds of the protagonists and bounces across mid-afternoon Dublin as all the folk scurry about. We get the perspectives of the priest, a one-legged sailor, the Dedalus's and many more. A little candid look at each of these lives goes a long way in affirming the humanity of Dublin. The increased perspective scale changes what matters in *Ulysses*. Each part of the city affects another and all things are interconnected— that is, not in a transcendent pantheist way, but in the basic paths of daily life which are enough to give the

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[34] John Morreal, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2016.

world a healthy pulse. Though Bloom remains at the center, we do not forget the vigor of Joyce's whole cast when we return to his story. It is from the characters of *Ulysses* that the intense aspects of comedy manifest. Considering how the characters function, Derek Attridge brings up Stephen Dedalus's discussion of Aquinas's properties of beauty from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: integritas, consonantia, and claritas (soundness, constancy, and clarity). Attridge applies these characteristics to Joyce saying that they not only define the abstract concept of beauty but also define Joyce's characters. "Beauty…" he states, "bears a structural resemblance to the notion of character… [which] depends on consistency and therefore recognizability."[35] For all of Joyce's stylistic artifice, the characters are always the vibrant heart of *Ulysses* and the source of our reading pleasure. Looking closely at how Joyce plays with the balance of the three characteristics, we can determine an important pressure between comedy and seriousness and even track tragedy as it transforms into comedy. By the thoughts and interactions of the four most important characters, we can string together a schema. This array shows us how a character chooses to live his or her life and how that affects others. As we take stock of these characteristics we start to see that there are key similarities between otherwise unrelated characters like Buck and Bloom or Molly and Stephen. What we end up discovering is an unambiguous rejection of artistic pretension, but also a sendup of cleverness and mockery for its own sake. By setting the characters side by side, and paying attention to what they do, we can see that *Ulysses* does indeed argue for an honest morality that is, as our author puts it in the penultimate episode, *jocoserious* (553).

[35] Derek Attridge, *Joyce Effects*, 53.

Buck and Stephen

It is stately, plump Buck Mulligan who begins *Ulysses*. He supersedes Stephen Dedalus in the poet's own introductory episode hogging the spotlight in his ungirdled dressing gown. In the middle of a mock sermon, he calls forth Stephen to join him and officially enter the book. Even though the narration takes place from Stephen's perspective we still see and hear Buck before Stephen arrives. Such is Buck's power and charisma which allows him full control over the first episode of *Ulysses*. One moment that briefly encapsulates Buck's personality occurs as Stephen hears him as they head toward the sea shore:

> He walked on. Behind him he heard Buck Mulligan club with his heavy bathtowel the leader shoots of ferns and grasses.
>
> —Down, sir! How dare you, sir! (15)

There is no subtlety to Buck, and we see his two key characteristics in this passage; He is loud and irreverent. He talks as much as he can and deliberately takes nothing seriously. Narratively, he and Stephen work well together. Buck brushes aside any seriousness Stephen extends to him, and it is clear that he is the source of a great amount of friction. Stephen plays the straight man to Buck's funny man. Joyce pairs them like a traditional comedy duo that might appear on a music hall stage. Extending the cracked hand mirror, "Look at yourself," Buck shouts gleefully, "you dreadful bard!" (6). Stephen's seriousness feeds Buck's energy and provides a platform for him to dive wholeheartedly into farce. Buck is arguably as intelligent as Stephen, but he allocates all of his mental energy into wit and ribaldry. In Buck's face we see only a single flash of gravity when Stephen addresses the cruelty in his attitude:

> —You said, Stephen answered, *O, it's only Dedalus whose mother is beastly dead.*

A flush which made him seem younger and more engaging rose to Buck Mulligan's cheek. (7)

This instant of embarrassment shows that Buck's performance is not bulletproof, and it provides an opportunity to see how he acts in a moment of vulnerability. Instead of showing some humility, Buck doubles down on his disparagement with a long speech about the meaninglessness of death. "It simply doesn't matter," he says and goes on to insult Stephen (7). This is Buck at his most abusive, retaliating against Stephen for overhearing the conversation with his Aunt. After this discussion, in proper Buck fashion, he sweeps away the topic as if it isn't and never was important: "Don't mope over it all day." He says and returns to his regular gags with the Englishman, Haines (8).

Buck is a clown. He mocks, makes merry, and centers himself in every scene he's in; unfortunately, his humor generates from an artless nihilism. One would expect the bard to be the great reveler in performance and debauchery instead of the frivolous medical student. Despite this irony there's no denying Buck's talent for comedy. He is grotesque, yet facilitates it by being truly funny. He is able to sustain the tolerance of others and even gain their favor through the force of his humor. More than just being the funny man, Joyce seems to have designed Buck's very existence to be a joke at Stephen's expense. As David Hayman puts it, Stephen is "miscast as a public performer in an Ireland where the clown and bone setter is valued above the priest of art."[36] From this point of view we can see Stephen's frustration at the Irish people who better appreciate ribald buffoonery and cheap laughs over serious art. Thus he calls Buck, "Usurper," the last word of *Ulysses*'s first episode which will resonate as Buck is invited to the party of literary scholars that evening (19). The word 'usurper' is significant in another way because it

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[36] David Hayman, *Ulysses: The Mechanics of Meaning*, (Prentice Hall Inc., 1970), 24.

reveals an important aspect of Stephen's character as much as it does Buck's. For Buck to usurp implies that Stephen has a throne to begin with (or has rightful claim to one). The crown that he believes belongs to him is the laurel, but this belief is only self-aggrandizement. At the risk of sounding like a grouchy uncle, the world does not owe Stephen anything. He may lament the superficial culture of Dublin, but his claim to greatness is only psychological. Thus, there is another sharp irony to Stephen's dilemma. He seeks the approval of a people he does not respect.

Given the tone and subject matter of the Telemachia, its easy to understand why so many critics like have super-seriously designated the whole book as tragic and dour or that it is overcomplicated and erudite. Albert Wachtel in *The Cracked Lookingglass*, for instance, makes a heroic effort in exploring Stephen's dark psychology. He tracks the artist's depression to the failure of Catholicism to provide him purpose. God, says Wachtel, "is indifferent to Stephen, if not unaware of him; unresponsive, if not nonexistent."[37] Stephen Dedalus is always concerned with aspects of control, whether religious or familial, and thus the inside of his head is a gloomy place. Because of this, a sad irony looms in his presence since he is our author's own avatar. When Stephen appears for the first time, Joyce describes him as "displeased and sleepy" (3). Stephen, despite his young age, is world-weary. He had only a taste of Paris before being called back to his dying mother in Dublin, and he is now in a depression. Burdened with guilt and disappointment in his art we find him stuck in an intellectual paralysis. His only actions beside his "moody brooding" are when he erupts into convoluted, often cryptic, metaphors about life, such as calling the "symbol of Irish art. The cracked lookingglass of a servant" (6). When around Buck Mulligan, Stephen is unassertive and doesn't speak much, but during his conversation with Mr. Deasy at school we see why it's best when he keeps his mouth shut. Mr. Deasy begins:

[37] Albert Wachtel, *The Cracked Lookingglass*, (Susquehanna University Press, 1992), 98.

- All human history moves toward one great goal, the manifestation of God.

  Stephen jerked his thumb towards the window, saying:

- That is God.

  Hooray! Ay! Whrrwhee!

- What? Mr Deasy asked.
- A shout in the street, Stephen answered, shrugging his shoulders. (28)

Mr. Deasy ignores this comment, but it is an example of Stephen's misplaced artistic efforts. God being a shout in the street (the sound of play), may seem at first to be a snippet of wisdom or some mystical insight, but Stephen is neither wise nor mystical. His assertion is just an errant thought verbalized. His artistic sensibility allows him to think in ways that no one else does; it allows him to imagine poetic possibilities; but not everything enigmatic is profound, and nothing is profound just because it is enigmatic. Stephen doesn't commit to his statement, and he's clearly a little embarrassed by it, so he shrugs, content to let Mr. Deasy continue his ramblings. Stephen isn't sure he even knows what he meant by it, but it sounded deep. Unfortunately, half-committed, half-thought out, semi-poetic jabs at old modes of thought are not enough fulfill himself or inspire anything in others. Stephen is railing against something, but he doesn't quite know what it is or how to go about it. Hugh Kenner states that Stephen's fears all point to his relationship with his father, Simon Dedalus. Stephen's inner monologue around Sandymount shows his concern that "his father, though turned indifferent, may destroy him through a tyranny of the blood. Drunkenness, improvidence, failure," and a general submission to modern life all threaten Stephen.[38] The cause of these afflictions may be inescapable since Stephen has already

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[38] Kenner, 58.

partially succumbed to them, but his inherent belief in art keeps him from fully accepting his fate as a complacent adult. Even so, his inability to accept this role of the average Dublin man doesn't give him hope for his own future and instead just sustains his depression. Stephen is in a liminal state. In an economically stagnant city he is unable to commit to giving up, but has experienced too much pain and general malaise to be motivated to pursue his craft idealistically.

Nevertheless, Stephen's artistic mind makes him experience the world through craft. As he walks along Sandymount with his eyes closed, his steps "crush, crack, crick, crick" to the rhythm of his little poem:

> Won't you come to Sandymount,
>
> Madeline the mare?

Rhythm begins, you see. I hear. Acatalectic tetrameter of iambs marching (31).

Reality and poetry blend together for Stephen. Craft is his frame of reference for life. Eliot would see this as giving shape to what is formless, and it is perhaps the only thing keeping him sane even if it doesn't make him happy. Happiness is key here because Joyce presents it as Stephen's central conflict. All the significance of his father, his mother, Irish history, religion, and art boil down simply to Stephen's sadness in a bitter world. As a result, he shapes the world with artistic form. It is his only method of coping, but it is not enough. Artifice alone does not provide the tools to find happiness. We can suspect, therefore, that intellectualism is a trap for the human spirit; it spirals only and leads nowhere just as Stephen wanders nowhere in particular marching to a meaningless rhythm. Stephen is always aware of the jokes people play, but never is the one that laughs.

More so than the ineffectuality of Stephen himself, the Telemachia shows the ineffectuality of his story. Joyce opens *Ulysses* with Stephen Dedalus for a good reason, and the

Telemachia's size is important given how short it is compared to the Odyssey section. It serves as an introduction but doesn't introduce the man who proves to be the protagonist of the story. It is as if Joyce gave Stephen a chance to be the protagonist, but by the time he loses himself on Sandymount Strand he can no longer be. In only three short chapters, Stephen's value as a narrative vehicle runs out. His potential both as a man and a literary character is severely limited. He needs saving, but Buck is not the one to do it. Establishing their relationship at the ingress of the novel sets up the motif of comic relationships. Joyce shows us the inadequacy of Stephen's friendship with Buck (and all his other relationships). Buck himself has the power of a comic hero but uses that power to degrade life (human and vegetable alike). He might make us laugh at his frivolity, but it is a consumptive frivolity which eats away at Stephen and the world of *Ulysses*. The two men show that comedy, no matter how funny, can fail to invigorate the vitality of the human spirit. Comedy for its own sake is not enough; the tragic energies must be converted into comic ones— so our author resorts to resetting the day with a new character, the real comic hero.

Bloom and Heroism

"Those literary ethereal people they are all. Dreamy, cloudy, symbolistic" thinks Leopold Bloom as he hunts for lunch. He then tries a quick crack at a bit of poetry himself:

> *The dreamy cloudy gull*
>
> *Waves o'er the waters dull.* (136)

In this scene from the episode, "Lestrygonians," Leopold Bloom refers specifically to the preeminent Irish literary critic George Russell as he passes by on a bicycle; so to do these lines

recall Stephen to the reader. Though well into Bloom's day at this point, we see here the great perspective shift that has occurred transitioning from Stephen to Bloom, and also we see what connects them. Bloom's distaste for "esthetes" shows that he is not impressed by the established intellectualism in Dublin. This is the same in-group that Stephen half-wishes to enter and we see make an attempt at in the following episode, "Scylla and Charybdis." Both these characters indulge in poetry, but Bloom's couplet comes from a humorous observation where Stephen's little poems come from mopey contemplation. Despite Bloom's distaste of the literary intellectuals he does not insult them and still maintains a fondness for art and poetry that is his own; that is, his interest is not beholden to any institutions or trends. A little bit of poetry refreshes Bloom just as it suffocates Stephen. He shows that such art isn't so hard, and since he accepts what pleasures it gives, he has no lofty inclinations for anything beyond these pleasures. To write poetry, one simply "must be in a certain mood," he thinks and then continues his search for food (136). As the first few episodes of part II ("The Odyssey') pass, the section functions seemingly as a juxtaposition to Stephen's, but as Bloom continues to get more episodes devoted to his perspective, like a Newtonian orbit, all things begin to spiral toward him. The universe of *Ulysses*, as Hugh Kenner calls it, is "Bloomocentric."[39] With his appearance in the fourth episode, "Calypso," Bloom begins his day, and we see how he traverses Dublin in his unique way.

Leopold Bloom's journey moment to moment is a path of shallow potholes. Often, he experiences a mild misfortune, usually due to a mistake of his own, then overcomes it through gentle ingenuity. Among his various morning tasks in his introductory episode, "Calypso," Bloom makes breakfast for himself. After settling for a pork kidney (he prefers mutton), he fries

[39] Kenner, 55.

the organ in butter and pepper. Then, absorbed by his duty to his wife he forgets it in the pan. After Molly smells burning, a comic scene ensues:

> The kidney! He cried suddenly.
>
> He fitted the book roughly into his inner pocket and, stubbing his toes against the broken commode, hurried out towards the smell, stepping hastily down the stairs with a flurried stork's legs. Pungent smoke shot up in an angry jet from a side of the pan. By prodding a prong of the fork under the kidney he detached it and turned it turtle on its back. Only a little burnt. (53)

None too dismayed, Bloom scrapes off the burnt part and eats the kidney with relish. This is our hero's modus operandi. He falters at nearly every step but never falls. This is what Bowen calls the *vital life force*.[40] Bowen conjures this term from Suzanne Langer's "The Comic Rhythm" to give a biological/anthropological foundation to his argument. The vital life force is the renewal and regeneration of existence which is both cyclical or adaptive. It is, in a sense, survival through inventiveness. In a Darwinian world, survival is a particularly grave term. Discussing it connotes natural selection, violence, teeth, nails, and the expenses of death. Death indeed permeates the novel, but Bloom's life and limb are not on the line. What *is* at risk are the aspects of his civil life: his marriage, potential friendships, his vocation, and overall, his happiness. The stability of these is threatened in a poverty-stricken Dublin. Bloom's goal, in its grandest interpretation, is to survive the modern world; for a middle class man, that means to provide for his family, to get along with his wife, and to maintain financial stability. But, the survival of daily life doesn't have to be an unpleasant experience. As important as these goals are, their difficulty is decreased by the method with which Bloom lives his life. He shows us that the challenges of life can be

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[40] Bowen, 1.

confronted earnestly without requiring dour pessimism. The quintessential quality Leopold bears is a bouncy resilience. Harold Bloom in *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations*, understands this as an invaluable quality of a comic character when he aligns Leopold in a tradition with the Wife of Bath, Falstaff, and Sancho Panza.[41] These characters, wise as they are funny, are, however, supporters and sidekicks in their respective stories, not the central heroes. So, since Leopold is in this tradition we would expect him not only to be in a meaningful partnership but to be the funny man to an idealistic lead, just as Buck is to Stephen.

This dissonance is where, I believe, epic and comedy collide creating what Lord calls *heroic mockery*. For Joyce to centralize the comic figure as the hero instead of a traditionally heroic character is to oppose the narrative role of the everyman—"a typical or ordinary human being."[42] There is no everyman in *Ulysses*, no single suburban perspective for a reader to cling to. Bloom is an extraordinary man more akin to the titular comic hero of *Tom Jones*, Henry Fielding's 1759 novel. In this novel, the sincere and fun-loving Tom sets out from home to find his way in the world. With the same appreciation of sensuality and through the same gentle ingenuity Bloom has, Tom overcomes humorous obstacles in each episodic chapter in search of lost family and eventually returns home to his love. Earlier, we looked at how *Tristram Shandy* was a direct stylistic influence for Joyce, but considering our author's familiarity with 18th century English comedy, *Tom Jones* matches *Ulysses* thematically almost perfectly. In the narrator's own words, *Tom Jones* is a "heroic, historical, prosaic poem."[43] Using the arc of the

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[41] Harold Bloom, introduction to *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations*, ed. Harold Bloom (Chelsea House Publishers, 2004), 1.
[42] OED
[43] Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones*, edited by Fredson Bowers, (Wesleyan University Press, 1983), 152.

Odyssey too, Fielding retells the typical hero's journey with an atypical hero. This special kind of hero very importantly possesses a strength that is not violent and faults that are not tragic.

The most important skill which the comic hero utilizes is the the scientific eye. When we read Bloom's episodes, we begin to see things as Bloom see them. When Bloom strolls down Eccles Street to purchase his kidney he is dressed in all black for the funeral of his acquaintance, Paddy Dignam. Feeling the summer sun ascending Bloom thinks, "Black conducts, reflects, (refracts is it?) the heat" (46). The joke here is that none of these are correct (black absorbs heat), but the specific optical term is unimportant because, whether he is correct or not, what matters is that Bloom is scientifically curious. This is a necessary trait for a comic character. Morreal states that a such a perspective puts us "on the lookout for unusual ideas and new ways of putting ideas together."[44] As a result of this, one with a scientific eye can develop a healthy skepticism to determine the inconsistencies between what people say and what they do, or in an even bigger sense, to determine the efficacy of tacit truths. One of the direct conflicts which Bloom faces occurs in the "Cyclops" episode. Here Bloom defends himself against the aggressive nationalist drunkards led by the citizen in Barney Kiernan's pub.

> —But do you know what a nation means? Says John Wyse
>
> —Yes, says Bloom.
>
> —What is it? Says John Wyse
>
> —A nation? Says Bloom. A nation is the same people living in the same place. (271-272)

[44] Morreall, 113.

Bloom’s answer elicits an eruption of cruel laughter from the listeners. The men laugh because they think his answer is naïve. But just as Bloom does not subscribe to the pretensions of the literary community neither does he accept the war mongering notions of impotent patriots. For Bloom, life is what he observes, and so he gives a literal answer rather than an idealistic one. Of course, as the conversation continues, it becomes clear that Bloom’s literal statements don’t come from an ignorance of politics, but from a deliberately comic (a slightly cheeky) philosophy of life. As the citizen continues to rail at the hero, Bloom says only truths, and the truth is enough to infuriate his opponent. As Adras Ungar notes in his analysis of the scene, the bar’s patrons “do not care about the existential coloring of the moment. They want [Bloom] to be responsible for a logos operant in the moment.”[45] Bloom intentionally does not give them the debate that they want.

His attitude not only reveals the pointlessness of the aggression, but the ineptitude of such aggression. The citizen speaks of the lost greatness of Ireland, the harbors, fleets, and trades. “Our eyes are on Europe” he says as he considers all Ireland had in the good-old days, “and will again.” He repeats ominously (269). On the other hand, the history that Bloom asserts is his own heritage, “Mendelssohn was a jew and Karl Marx and Mercadante and Spinoza. And the Saviour was a jew and his father was a jew. Your God” (280). Though we can sense Bloom’s irritation, he still manages to win out without insulting the citizen. It is here then that the citizen resorts to actual violence hurling a biscuit tin at our hero. The trick of Bloom’s character in this scene is his ability to be both funny and sincere simultaneously. The nationalists have cemented themselves in beliefs and rhetoric which are self-aggrandizing, misinformed, and misleading, but Bloom responds casually:

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[45] Andras Ungar, *Joyce’s Ulysses as National Epic*, (University of Florida Press, 2002), 56.

Force, hatred, history, all that. That's not life for men and women, insult and hatred. And everybody knows that it's the very opposite of that that is really life.

—What? says Alf.

—Love, says Bloom. I mean the opposite of hatred. I must go now (273)

Bloom's scientific eye is able to detect the ironies and falsehoods in the nationalist ideologies; thus, he can easily argue against them since they are incompatible with the real life that he observes. His direct, unheated assertions comically deflate their claims and while giving an antithesis to zealotry.

The ability to deflate what is grandiose is the first of two exclusive powers that the comic hero possesses (powers made possible by the scientific eye). The hero can restrain what is lofty and high-flown and can refashion what is ordinary into something extraordinary. Bloom importantly possesses both of these powers while sharing only the first with the other comic character, Buck Mulligan. Both are jolly and possess the scientific eye which is so important to comedy, but Bloom alone can also reassure the greatness in the little things while rejecting the pretentions of the big with equal comic force. As Harold Bloom says, "The commonplace needs no hallowing for Poldy."[46] Joyce sees fit to reward Bloom for his efforts against the patriots, and so raises his language to great mimetic heights. Bloom, instead of trotting off in a carriage, ascends to heaven on a chariot garbed in a golden raiment. It is Joyce's own divine intervention, telling us in a funny way that Bloom has earned a glorious rescue, if only once.

But Joyce does not rescue Bloom from his other humiliations throughout the day including his cuckoldry. Joyce doesn't shy from either exalting Bloom to great heights or otherwise degrading him as he sees fit. In the dreamy metaphorical episode, "Circe," Joyce

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[46] Bloom, 2.

mashes together every aspect Bloom's day as well as his own thematic motifs of nationality, religion, and literature. Bloom's skills as a comic hero are put to the ultimate test since the world is no longer logical and everything exaggerated. Though we had been able to determine reality from fancy over the previous episodes, even with a scientific eye of our own, we can no longer say what is real or not. Joyce uses this style more to deal with his own themes than to explain the real plot developments. As Hugh Kenner points out, nothing in Circe seems to have actually happened. The characters never again mention the events nor does the financial catalogue for June 16th in the episode, Ithaca, include the eleven shillings that Bloom pays for a broken chandelier in the brothel. Regardless, Bloom exits "Circe" a changed man, "courageous, ready of mind… 'Circe's' rummaging amid the roots of his secret fears and desires has brought forth a new self-possession."[47] It is in this episode that Bloom is experiences the most extreme highs and lows. Early on he is nominated the "undoubted emperor-president and king-chairman" of Ireland. A little later at the brothel, Bloom's indulges his sexual masochism. "Enormously I desiderate your domination." He says to the whoremistress, Bella (430). Their genders reverse and he is transformed into a female submissive for the cruel taskmaster, Bello. The comic hero is not too flawless to avoid being humiliated, but also not too prideful to not enjoy it a little.

There is no part of the hero's journey that Joyce does not imbue with some irony. The plot of Ulysses reaches its climax in "Ithaca." It is in this episode that many narrative threads come together syncing thematically with the return home. Bloom and Stephen arrive at 7 Eccles Street. Bloom then becomes irritated with himself having forgotten to remember that he forgot his key. The "keyless couple" stands at the front door. A moment passes: "To enter or not to enter. To knock or not to knock" (546). By alluding to Hamlet, Joyce stages this brief instance of

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[47] Kenner, 127.

indecision as momentous. The reference to the Danish prince reminds us of the claim to a throne. A man has an option to seize rightful rule as the head of household or to slip off into the night. Of course, the reference exaggerates the situation showing that the stakes on the stoop are not epic or tragic. Instead, the big decision is one of unselfish consideration. Bloom has made himself responsible for Stephen, but he doesn't wish to disturb Molly by making her let them in. He chooses to clamber over the fence and sneak in through the back. The hero does not get a grand uninterrupted homecoming one might hope for after his long sub-mythic journey. Bloom returns, not in conquest, but to another small annoyance. We are, by the seventeenth episode, well acquainted with Leopold Bloom. His solution, the "stratagem," is no surprise given his actions during the day. He is clever but not devious. He is decisive but not confrontational. The victory is not just that Bloom returns, but that he is able to overcome the challenge of entering the house without bothering the woman he cares for. Bloom hopping the fence is a perfect example of *Ulysses* in a comic mode. The humor arises from both the inflated stakes and Bloom, once again, bumbling awkwardly through a situation to success.

Bloom's first episode, "Calypso" and his last, "Ithaca," mirror each other. Not only do they hold the departure and return of Bloom, but within their respective hours Bloom performs similar tasks. This allows us to consider what has changed and what hasn't from the beginning to the end of our hero's adventure. In the morning he tends to Molly, fixing her tea and breakfast. At night he tends to Stephen, making cocoa. "Calypso" ends with Bloom's pleasurable bowel movement; "Ithaca" culminates in a revelatory double urination. Leaving the bedroom to rescue his kidney, he stubs his toes; reentering the bedroom at night, he hits his head on the sideboard. The repetition of action speaks to the episodic quality of *Ulysses*, and the orbital revolution of Molly and Stephen around Bloom. Finally, lying head to toe with his wife, Bloom's day is done.

Still an ultimate consummation has not occurred—nor should it. We might wonder: has he reclaimed his place as patriarch? Has he opened a new chapter in his life with Stephen? His not so grand and rather unvindicated conclusion should not disappoint us. The novel has taught us that in whatever condition the day has left him, he has maintained his integrity and has not been defeated. Whether or not he is *victorious* (for whatever that word is worth) he has taught us to "regard his common decency… as a brand of heroism with which we can all identify."[48] Bloom will awaken to a new day.

Molly and Love

And the new day does come. As Mrs. Marion Bloom tosses and turns in bed at the ungodly hour, she thinks, "I suppose they're all getting up in China now (642). Had Joyce ended *Ulysses* at "Ithaca" we might have indeed had a puzzled outlook of the novel. Bloom would still have returned home ending his heroic arch having gained his surrogate son and forgiven his adulterous wife, but that wife would still be at the unpassable distance to the reader that she appears to be to Bloom. So in proper comedic fashion, *Ulysses* gives us a final all-encompassing jocoserious speech to reflect on Bloom's long journey and to comment on the current status of things.

Becoming so familiar with Bloom, stepping into Molly's head is like stepping back from the story allowing us to put things into perspective. We long anticipate her voice, not only because she's a singer, but because she looms through the story. Bloom is conscious of her throughout his episodes while buying her her soap and her romance book, often thinking of other women with respect to her. Despite her great presence over the novel she makes only brief

[48] Bowen, 131.

appearances. Bloom has a short conversation with her in "Calypso," and we get only a glimpse of her plump arm as it tosses a penny to the one-legged sailor in "Wandering Rocks." Yet, if all things truly orbit Bloom what does Molly ultimately provide for the story? Structurally, her episode fits nicely, enclosing Bloom's day between itself and Stephen's introductory episodes almost evenly. At the beginning of the novel, Buck is Stephen's character foil, but when we reach the end, Molly appears to be Stephen's mirrored opposite. If Stephen is all cognition, then Molly is all body. Her thoughts constantly return to sensuality and wild sexual fantasies. Here we find another fun irony in that the most physically obsessed character of the book gets the completely internal, unfiltered, quintessential stream of consciousness monologue.

Molly's monologue or soliloquy is the most sincere section of the story, and yet this does not diminish the humor. Joyce's craft is at once, a unique storytelling artifice and the most real way to express the function of the brain in bed. Because of this, we get to learn as much about Molly in only forty pages as we do Bloom in five-hundred. Their relationship is of particular interest to her, and her thoughts drift to him with varying emotions.

> he made me spend the 2nd time tickling me behind with his finger I was coming for about 5 minutes with my legs round him I had to hug him after O Lord I wanted to shout out all sorts of things fuck or shit or anything at all only not to look ugly or those lines from the strain who knows the way hed take it you want to feel your way with a man theyre not all like him thank God (621).

Molly takes intense gratification from sensual pleasure. She possesses this quality of a comic hero, but to a greater magnitude than even Bloom seems to. Much of that which makes Molly funny is not only her candidness, but the jarring nature of her speech. A basic and still accepted theory in humor is *incongruity theory* which says basically that we find funny things that

interrupt our patterns of understanding to surprise or shock us. Molly's mind works in this way, and Kant would call it the "changing free play of sensations."[49] Throughout the entire eight sentence episode Molly slips seamlessly from mundane musing to meaningful memory to spirited sexual thought. One of her big debates is whether or not to bring Bloom breakfast in bed as he asked for that morning.

Though Molly does not think this explicitly, we very importantly discover what she has in common with Bloom. we can understand what initially drew them to each other and made them fall in love. As sexual as Molly is, she has separated sex from love, and though we may have found Bloom's everyday lust funny, Molly's libido dwarfs Bloom's own in comparison. Her wild and half-serious fantasies show her desperate desire for pleasure, but she continually compares Bloom to her past lovers—particularly Blazes Boylan. She compares the amount of ejaculate the two men have as well as their manners. She also worries about Bloom's own infidelity, but tries to convince herself that she doesn't care even as she schemes a way to uncover it: "not that I care two straws now who he does it with or knew before that way though Id like to find out so long as I dont have the two of them under my nose all the time." (609) Molly wants Bloom just as badly as he wants her, but there is still odd incompatibility that they find themselves in that is literalized by them lying head to toe. "I'll put on my best shift and drawers let him have a good eyeful out of that to make his micky stand for him" (641). In a grand final irony, Molly's desire to woo Bloom changes how we've seen him the whole book—he is not the cuckold trying to win back his wife, but the despondent lover who must himself be won back. Declan Kiberd acknowledges this as one example of the contrasexual nature of the

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[49] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, tr. J. H. Bernard (Oxford University Press, 1911), 47.

couple. The two are “true androgynes,” which is a combination we can imagine worked well when they were at their most intimate.[50]

The famous ‘Yes’ which ends “Penelope” and closes *Ulysses* does not release the characters of their struggles, their anxieties, or their daily disputes. These will never end, just as they don’t end for us in real life. What Molly’s “Yes” does is declare that she accepts these difficulties just as Bloom does and will continue to embrace life. As egocentric as she is, her imaginative power and desire for love keep her connected to her husband. Boylan gives her the physical pleasure that Bloom doesn’t, but she does not love Boylan, he can only steal her away metaphorically. She will always return to Poldy and always fight for him; we have no reason to think otherwise. We don’t know what June 17th will bring, but it will come, and it will bring with it an anticipation that is ripe for endless comedic possibilities.

[50] Kiberd, 262.

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