

# 29. Joyce's *Ulysses*

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**J**AMES JOYCE was born in Rathgar, Dublin, in 1882, the eldest of 10 surviving children of John Joyce, a tax collector, and Mary Murray, an accomplished pianist. From the age of six he attended Clongowes Wood College, one of the most renowned preparatory schools in Ireland, but when his father lost his job and fell on hard times he couldn't pay the fees and Joyce eventually transferred to Belvedere College, also, like Clongowes, run by the Jesuits. Here in his early teens he experienced a bout of religiosity and even contemplated entering the priesthood, but the feeling soon passed and he went to the other extreme, rejecting Catholicism altogether. In his mid-teens he began visiting prostitutes and writing poems and essays. In his final school year he discovered Henrik Ibsen and later wrote an essay on the Norwegian dramatist which appeared in the *Fortnightly Review* and received a letter of thanks from Ibsen himself.

In 1898 he entered University College Dublin to study Modern Languages. After graduating in 1902 he left Ireland for Paris to study medicine but abandoned the course and then had to return home on the news that his mother was dying of cancer. Back in Dublin he scraped a living reviewing books, teaching and – as an accomplished tenor like his father – singing. In 1904 he met Nora Barnacle, a chambermaid from Galway, and the two left Ireland together for Europe, eventually marrying in 1931. They lived mostly in Zurich, Trieste and Paris and fled to Zurich after the Nazi occupation of France in 1940. Joyce died there of a perforated ulcer in 1941 at the age of 58.

Joyce abandoned Catholicism at the age of 16 and remained an unbeliever for the rest of his life. He was highly critical of the Catholic Church, declaring in 1904 in a letter to Nora that “I made secret war upon it when I was a student and



James Joyce

declined to accept the positions it offered me. By doing this I made myself a beggar but I retained my pride. Now I make open war upon it by what I write and say and do”.

In another letter he put it bluntly: the Catholic Church was ‘the enemy of Ireland’. And although religion has a significant presence in his works which inevitably reflect the Catholic culture in which he grew up, in no sense was he, as some commentators would have it, a ‘Catholic writer’. On the contrary, as Geert Lernout says, “James Joyce lived and died as an apostate, as somebody who had placed himself knowingly and willingly outside of that church. It would be a great injustice (if not a mortal sin) to drag him back in” (*Help My Unbelief: Joyce and Religion*, Continuum 2010, p217).

Joyce was not the first Irish writer from a Catholic background to attack the Church in his works. Another notable example, and one who influenced him, was George Moore (1852-1933). In *The Untilled Field* (1903) he describes the crushing effect of the Church in rural Ireland where creative or inquisitive

people are driven out of the country. But it was Joyce who first focused critically on urban Irish society and in his analysis he pulled no punches. Yes, according to Joyce, Ireland was inhibited and oppressed by British rule, but there was also a considerable amount of self oppression, and the Catholic Church was at the heart of it, paralysing the people and holding them in its grip.

The seriousness of Joyce's attack is demonstrated by the reception his works received in Ireland. His first work of fiction, *Dubliners* (1914), a volume of 15 short stories, was written between 1904 and 1907 but it took him nearly a decade to get a publisher, one of whom had rejected it on the grounds that it was ‘anti-Irish’. Joyce himself said that *Dubliners* was intended “to betray the soul of that hemiplegia or paralysis which many consider a city”. He believed that the individuality of the inhabitants of Dublin had been subsumed in a religion whose moral, political and cultural influence denied them any opportunity to make choices for themselves. This suffocating influence prevented the citizens from escaping their dull lives, whether it was repressed children, humiliated women or alcoholic men.

The first three stories are all narrated in the first person, and they all have nameless boys as their narrators. In the first, ‘The Sisters’, a boy is reacting to news of the death of a priest, Father Flynn, whose home he frequented and who was suspected of having gone a bit mad. He was said to have something ‘queer’ about him and to have had ‘a great wish’ for the boy. The youngster himself feels a great sensation of liberation at the news, but at the same time the priest haunts him and his growth is being stunted by the whole religious culture in which he is steeped. The relationship between the two is left ambiguous but one publisher wondered if there was an implication of sodomy in the story. There is surely no doubt that

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Joyce was alluding to paedophilia in the priesthood long before the practice was exposed.

In 'Araby', a story of lost innocence, a boy lusts after his friend Mangan's sister who lives across the street, and his infatuation is so intense that he fears he will never gather the courage to speak with her and express his feelings. One day she speaks to him and asks if he is going to the Araby bazaar. She can't go herself because there is a retreat that week in her convent. He says he will go and bring her back a gift. When the day comes, however, his uncle returns home late after a bout of drinking. After much anguished waiting, the boy is given some money but by the time he arrives it is too late. The bazaar is closing for the night and in any case is filled with cheap trinkets, petty gossip and sellers greedily counting their takings. It proves to be a tawdry shadow of his dreams. The boy cries in frustration as he realises the truth, and his eyes 'burn with anguish and anger'.

The story is replete with symbolism. The link between religion and romance is stressed throughout, especially in the ecstasy of the boy's passion. The bazaar itself is an exotic symbol of enchantment and beauty, away from the mundane routine of city life, but it is also something foreign and therefore inaccessible, much like Mangan's sister. Its closing reminds him of the church: "I recognized a silence like that which pervades a church after a service". Mangan's sister represents not only the Virgin Mary but also Ireland itself, so that the boy's quest is made on behalf of his native country. Araby, a romantic name for the Middle East, combines enchanting elements of the Catholic Church (which often held bazaars to raise money for charity) and England because the only two men still there speak with English accents. Thus the boy's mission on behalf of an idealised homeland is thwarted in turn by the Irish themselves (his drunken uncle), the Catholic Church, and England.

An overriding sense of separation from his Irish homeland, the Catholic Church and his own family pervades most of Joyce's writings. These themes dominate his first uncompleted autobiographical novel, *Stephen Hero*, which he began in 1901 and abandoned in

1907. He threw most of the manuscript away (what was left was published in 1944, three years after his death) and restarted the work as *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, published in 1916. It is a partly fictional version of Joyce's younger self from early childhood to young adulthood at university before he exiled himself from his native land. At early school Stephen Dedalus is a pious child who has faith in the wisdom and goodness of his teachers as men of God. But when he is unfairly beaten by Father Dolan, the prefect of studies, he begins to doubt the Church's moral authority. As adolescence develops, he immerses himself in the works of subversive writers and his sexuality burgeons. He begins to lose his religious faith and even visits a prostitute, deciding to experience the world through sin rather than piety. Guilt returns for a while and he repents his sinful ways, but when he refuses the offer to join the priesthood he realises that his decision is a refutation of religion itself.

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In the final chapter Stephen determines, in a passage whose opening echoes Satan's rejection of God: "I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it call itself my home, my fatherland, or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use — silence, exile and cunning". He will go to encounter the reality of experience, create a new identity as an artist, rise to new heights of creation like the mythical Daedalus, and "forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race".

**J**OYCE was both repulsed and inspired by the Catholic Church, a fact that can be clearly seen in *Ulysses*, his most celebrated work, first conceived as a short story for *Dubliners* and then

as a sequel to *Portrait*. The greater part of it was written during the First World War, and early chapters were serialised in 1918 in the American *Little Review* magazine, but its sexual frankness caused an outrage and it was confiscated by customs officials and a court stopped publication. In 1922, however, the American-born bookseller Sylvia Beach agreed to bring out the finished book in Paris under the imprint of Shakespeare and Company, the name of her bookstore. As it includes scenes of masturbation and a 50-page soliloquy by Molly Bloom in which she describes her sexual history and desires, it immediately aroused controversy. When an attempt was made to import it into America, 500 copies were seized by New York postal officials and burned. Eventually, in 1933 Judge John Woolsey, in a perceptive analysis, ruled that it was not obscene but a work of literary merit, indeed an amazing *tour de force*, and a month later in January 1934 Random House published it in the United States. Two years later, in 1936, the novel was legally published in Britain.

It was technically never banned in Ireland but only because it was not imported and offered for sale until the 1960s for fear of such a ban and its attendant costs, a fear that was fully justified considering the long list of Irish authors whose works suffered this fate, including Liam O'Flaherty, Seán O Faoláin, Francis Stuart, Frank O'Connor and Brendan Behan.

Initially it was largely ignored or rubbished in public discourse. Shane Leslie attacked it as 'an odyssey of the sewer'. J.P. Mahaffy, former Provost of Trinity College, Dublin, thought that Joyce's works were "a living argument in defence of my contention that it was a mistake to establish a separate university for the aborigines of this island — for the corner boys who spit into the Liffey".

When the novel finally appeared in Ireland, it was ignored by the Censorship Board and could be bought in some bookshops, even if it was not always on display but kept under the counter. Joseph Strick's film of the novel, on the other hand, *was* banned by the Irish Film Censorship Board in 1968,

a ban which wasn't lifted until 2001. Thus for 33 years Joyce's own country was the only one in Europe where audiences were not allowed to see the sole film of *Ulysses* made in English.

*Ulysses* records events in the life of its two central characters, Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus, on 16th June 1904 in Dublin, which happened to be the day of Joyce's first date with Nora Barnacle. It is clear that the main male characters are all secular in their outlook. Stephen is the same man a few years after the events of *A Portrait*, and he avers in *Ulysses* that "you behold in me... a horrible example of freethought". The two men with whom he is currently living at the Sandycove Martello Tower are also atheists. The visiting Englishman Haines states that he is not a believer himself and can't stomach the idea of a personal God, while the medical student Buck Mulligan, who quotes atheist poets Shelley and Swinburne, takes great pleasure in mocking the Catholic Mass and blasphemously singing 'The Ballad of Joking Jesus'.

Yet, above all, it is Leopold Bloom, the son of a Hungarian Jewish father and an Irish Protestant mother, who embodies the modern secular Humanist. He appears to have lost his faith at the age of fourteen and sees religion in Marxist terms as the opium of the masses. Indeed he would prefer an ounce of opium to submitting to Catholicism. In his library is a volume entitled *Thoughts from Spinoza*, and we should note that Spinoza, who was also from a Jewish background, was one of the first modern European freethinkers.

Joyce chose someone from a Jewish background because he wanted the character to be an outsider who could criticise Irish Catholicism more convincingly than an apostate or a Protestant. He was also aware of the anti-semitism rife in many European countries at the time, and by making Bloom Jewish he could create a connection between his Irish characters and communities the world over. For Bloom his Jewishness is something imposed on him by others rather than a feeling that he has himself, and the same is true of many of the stereotypical characteristics of Irish identity.

As a boy, Joyce's favourite hero was Odysseus (whom the Romans knew as Ulysses) because he did not fulfil the normal heroic image. He was more complicated and had brains as well as brawn. He actually disliked war and tried to avoid military service by feigning madness, and when he eventually returned home he established peace on Ithaca. The novelist was also attracted by his cunning in devising the wooden horse ploy to end the siege of Troy and in disguising himself as a beggar to find out what was going on at home when he returned. But, most of all, Joyce was taken by the trials and pains he faced on his homeward 'odyssey'.

Homer's hero, 'forever wandering', struggles to discover himself and his values in hostile surroundings and reveals his kinder side when, faced with the choice to sacrifice his men's lives or his own, he willingly chooses the latter. But ultimately he is the survivor, the one who uses every trick and ruse in his arsenal to avoid death and who lives to tell the tale. He finds his fulfilment not in immortality nor in battle but in his homecoming. If the *Iliad* glorifies the cult of death, then the *Odyssey* is a recall to life and to peace. And, largely written during World War One, *Ulysses* is a great pacifist novel.

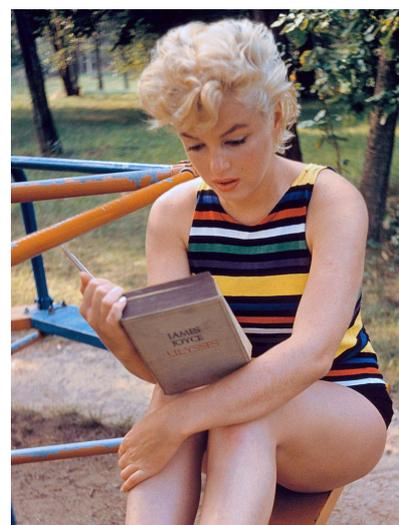
Joyce created Bloom as someone who shares many of the better qualities of Odysseus. His Humanist-Christian ethic is shown when he gives his time and money to Paddy Dignam's widow without drawing attention to himself, visiting Mina Purefoy in the maternity hospital, forgiving his adulterous wife, and fulfilling the role of good Samaritan when Stephen Dedalus is knocked down. He rejects religious and racial hatred and opposes war and bloodshed, affirming that love is the only answer and the only force beyond nationalism. His vision for Ireland encompasses all religions and none. It is the post-nationalist Ireland to which Joyce himself would have liked to come home.

Why did Joyce end a male-dominated novel with a lengthy interior monologue by a woman? The answer is that *Ulysses* is not only the greatest 20th century Humanist novel but it is also a prescient manifesto of sexual

liberation and at the same time a celebration of the senses. It has been said that the main characters Bloom and Dedalus disbelieve in religion but strongly believe in sex. Yet ironically the only leading character in the novel who adheres to a religious faith is the sluttish Molly Bloom, who is the opposite of Odysseus's faithful wife Penelope and also the antithesis of the Catholic Church's image of the pure and chaste mother.

By concluding Leopold's odyssey with Molly's 'stream of consciousness', Joyce restores women's place in a society that discounts them as individuals. In creating a woman who is assertive and revels in sexual pleasure, he demonstrates that women need not be victims of a religion that represses their sexuality and brings so much unhappiness. And in creating a woman with 'manly' qualities married to a man who is in touch with his feminine side, Joyce is challenging gender stereotypes.

It doesn't mean that Molly is fully liberated, for in a patriarchal society she is still guided, not entirely by her personal desires but rather by the need to be desired by others. Society can only change if there are more Mollys and more Leopolds, which is why *Ulysses* was well ahead of its time in its Humanism, its pacifism, its postnationalism, its feminism and its toleration and celebration of flawed humanity in all its manifestations.



Marilyn Monroe reading Molly Bloom's soliloquy in a playground on Long Island in 1955