

The Family in the *Odyssey* and *Ulysses*

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In studying the relationship between Joyce and Homer, critics and scholars from Valery Larbaud and Stuart Gilbert up to the present have written perceptive commentaries on the similarities between *Ulysses* and the *Odyssey*.¹ Stressing what Joyce drew on in paralleling his epic with Homer's, they have given us lucid and cogent interpretations of Joyce's use of the *Odyssey* in erecting a scaffold and building his themes. In our view, however, the Homeric Parallel can and should be analyzed in terms of Joyce's departures from Homer—that is, in the light of what Joyce refrained from using. In our interpretation, what Joyce did not lift from Homer is just as significant as what he did lift: his refusal to draw similarities between Homer's world and his own is of real import in understanding the thematic thrust of his work. The dissimilarities we shall point out should contribute to the reader's understanding of both the *Odyssey* and *Ulysses* and, hopefully, to his recognition of significant differences between ancient and modern literature. We propose to examine basic differences between the two works—specifically, the treatments of the family.

The family is central to an understanding of the *Odyssey*. The Homeric family units, the family experiences, the relationships between families and among members of the same family vary considerably. There are, however, constant underlying convictions: there is something necessary and natural about the family; there is an ideal norm for it; and any deviation from this norm is at least strange and noticeable, always educative, and sometimes terrifying.

In Homer's poem, the family is always and everywhere aristocratic. No ordinary men, in our sense of the word, are of any consequence in the work; even the slaves are noblemen who have come on hard times, and their stories are told with reference both to their own familial origins and to the families they are now connected with. Homer presents an ample and varied display of noble families—wealthy, powerful, wellborn, and possessed of rich traditions. The elaborate ceremoniousness of the meals furnishes an excellent example. Eating is never a simple matter of taking food: dinners are sumptuous and ritualized. The general formula finds a stranger being seated on his arrival and offered a great quantity and variety of food and drink before any questions are asked, even his name. The rites of hospitality will include offering him water to wash his hands, even a bath, sometimes given by a princess, with a change of clothing to make his banqueting more comfortable; when it seems appropriate, or useful, even a goddess will contribute to the beauty of the guest. In the most ceremonious feasts an animal is sacrificed, sometimes after special preparation (Nestor, with the gilded horns of his offering), and before the meal begins there is a sequence of prayers, usually for the guest and his future. In a great court, a rhapsode sings to entertain the guests, and games and other entertainment may take place. All this is recognized as righteous, and integral to complex and sophisticated aristocratic custom.²

Aristocratic families in Homer's world are all landed and rural, housed in dwellings with many chambers, porches, and storerooms: in describing the household of Odysseus, Homer takes us to the fields, to the herds of swine, sheep,

and goats; Menelaus, who presides in a more refined and elegant household, still describes himself in terms of the lands he controls. The households are ancestral, and in the lands, through sons, the families will maintain their identity. To these families, treasures, heirlooms, and guest-gifts belong. Possessions measure the family's wealth and determine its importance, its reputation, *kleos*, just as surely as the martial exploits of warriors determine their *kleos*. From the beginning to the end of the poem we note the steady and proper concern with possessions—rich garments, goblets, mixing bowls, wine, chariots, ornamented weapons—and with what the possessions imply. Some are assurances of friendship which will be lasting. Others are specially fitted to the hero and identify him—the bow of Odysseus, his famous garment, the once grand but now pathetic dog, Argos. Even in the strange land of the Phaiakians possessions are important in determining the relative status of the family. Hence before Odysseus returns to Ithaka, many treasures are bestowed on him, enough to more than make up for what he has lost in his adventures; on his return, his first thought is for these possessions, and before he begins the grisly task of reestablishing order in his household, he makes sure his gifts are safe and secure. After the slaying of the suitors, the recognition, the anagnorisis, of Laertes and Odysseus is in terms of the trees which belong to the son; with Penelope, the recognition is achieved in a more intimate manner—the special nature of the marriage bed and her knowledge that no one but Odysseus could know about it, a reflection on her fidelity, the quality which distinguishes her throughout the poem.

Aristocratic families in Homer's world are all landed and rural, housed in dwellings with many chambers, porches, and storerooms: in describing the did, he could have made his hero an aristocrat, surrounded him with his peers, and placed the locale for his action in an appropriate rural setting. But Joyce does not present an aristocratic world. There are no Butlers or Armstrongs, no Gore-Booths or Gregorys, no Lissadells or Coole Parks, as there are in the poetry of Yeats. Joyce deliberately avoids portraying the Irish aristocracy as of any real consequence on June 16, 1904. He concentrates, instead, on dear and dirty central Dublin, stressing the welter and confusion of modern urban life, and focuses on the Dublin bourgeois Yeats despised, emphasizing the ordinariness of his conquered, rather backward country by presenting the lower ranks of its citizenry.

The modern Odysseus, Bloom, is thoroughly bourgeois and, as a Jew, almost a second class citizen in England's troublesome colony. His household is a rented flat, vastly inferior to the ancestral home of Odysseus: it has no treasure trove, no banquet hall, no armor room, no wine cellar; there is no estate—no cattle, sheep, swine, vineyards; he has no splendid garments, only two store-bought suits. In the routine course of his routine day, he participates in no sumptuous feasts, is honored by no distinguished hosts: he bathes alone in the Lincoln Place Bathhouse, and for this he must pay one shilling six-pence; he cleans his hands at the end of the day with Barrington's Lemon-flavored Soap, which he has forgotten to pay for; he breakfasts with his cat, lunches standing in Davy Byrne's pub, and eats a rather furtive dinner in the Ormond Hotel, listening to the songs of a widower, a bachelor, and a celibate—the meals themselves (kidney, cheese, liver) are anything but regal, costing him a total of two shillings ten-pence. In the course of his travels about Dublin, Bloom encounters no gentry and receives no gifts; instead, he is in the company of ordinary Dubliners, frequently of men who gamble, cadge drinks, borrow money, scrimp to make ends meet. He returns to 7 Eccles Street having earned twelve shillings eight-pence more than he has spent, and his possessions, listed pedantically in the Ithaca episode, amount to little more than the meager belongings he has been able to purchase and the junk which he has accumulated, but not bothered to throw away, in the course of an inconsequential middle class

life. His bed is not a treasure lovingly and skillfully wrought, a symbol of generative and joyous marriage. It is store-bought; it bears the imprint of Boylan's body; it is dirtied by flakes of Plumtree's Potted Meat, which Boylan and Molly ate earlier that day—for Molly is not distinguished by her fidelity and, equally important in the light of the Homeric parallel, unlike Penelope, is not courted by a suitor desiring her as a wife and consort in an aristocratic household, but rather is simply the object of the sterile lust of a common bounder.³

Aristocracy, in Homer's world, necessarily entails genealogy, for genealogy differentiates the aristocrat from those who lack glorious lines of descent, provides the historical roots essential to the interrelationships of families, and serves as the framework by which an individual can identify and understand himself. All the important figures in the *Odyssey* identify themselves by reference to their families; even the good slaves are allowed suitable genealogies. Odysseus always identifies himself as the son of Laertes, the husband of Penelope, the father of Telemachus, and the head of his household in Ithaka. Moreover, this genealogy is traced back to Autolykos, the father of Antikleia (recall the story of the ϵ car in Book Nineteen)⁴; and this provides the key to the significance of Odysseus's name.

Autolykos, Odysseus's maternal grandfather, was famous for his skill in lying and thievery, hence his name. This is made much of in Book Nineteen, and in the naming of Odysseus: this is his special characteristic—wily, clever, however one translates *polútropos*, which Homer assigns to his hero in the very first line of the poem. It is this ability to scheme, to lie, to bide his time, which Odysseus uses so well when he returns to Ithaka, for this characteristic, when he employed it, saw him through the terrors of his homeward trip, and the absence of it accounted in large part for the death of his companions, characterized in the prologue and throughout the poem as *népio*, foolish, or perhaps better, childish; because Odysseus is clever, he remains dear to Athene, who helps him plan his strategy for the recovery of his home and specifically applauds his cleverness as they conspire. This hereditary, specifically familial element is thus central to the action of the entire poem.

Within Odysseus's family exists a similarity which is noteworthy in any careful reading. Like her husband, Penelope is careful, faithful, determined to aggrandize possessions to the family, tricky in the ruse of the web and the contest of the bow—in short, the perfectly fitted consort for the wily hero. Telemachus is not yet clever at the beginning of the poem, and that is the point of the *Telemacheia*—he must become clever, in order to be of assistance to his father and take his proper place within the family. In all this we see the naturalness of the family, and the dedication of all its members to its welfare.

Joyce, as Richard Ellmann makes abundantly clear, was a man with a sure sense of himself as member of a family, firmly committed to his family as a unit: son of John and May, husband of Nora, father of Giorgio and Lucia. An important factor in his decision to make his modern Odysseus a Jew was his feeling of a spiritual kinship with the Jews because they had maintained strong family ties over the ages, perhaps because of the isolation they also shared with Joyce.⁵ Frank Budgen's reports of conversations with Joyce indicate that a pivotal factor in Joyce's selection of Odysseus as the most complete character in literature was the Greek hero's position as member of a family unit.⁶ Yet the family ties of the Odysseus figure Joyce created as his hero are strikingly weak, especially in the light of Joyce's belief in the importance of the family and in terms of the parallel he is manipulating.

Joyce's hero, in sharp contrast to Homer's, has no rich genealogy to which he can refer in order to define himself. Though aware of his Jewish roots and heritage, Bloom has three times been baptized a Christian, has married a Christian, and

begotten children who are not properly speaking even Jewish, according to Judaic Law. The modern Odysseus has little sense of ancestry. There is no Autolykan strain. The modern Laertes, Rudolph Virag, is dead: a failure in life, a suicide, surviving only in Bloom's memory as "poor papa." The modern Telemachus, Rudy, also is dead, emerging only as a "changeling," a grotesque apparition at the end of the Circe episode. Here is a marked divergence from the *Odyssey*: Bloom is irrevocably sundered from both his father and his son, and his dominant emotion in regard to them is a steady feeling of irreparable loss. Like Odysseus, Bloom would like to reestablish his family, but he cannot; he spends the day deliberately staying away from home—his bed *will* be violated, and he can find no means of preventing it.

Bloom's name, unlike that of Odysseus, is a mere matter of convenience; though it is possible to garner symbolic implications from it (and critics have done so), the important thing about the name in relation to the *Odyssey* is that it is not his rightful family name, and does not embody his family history or character traits. Bloom does possess a certain quirky Odyssean cleverness which helps him get through the day, and he is capable of schemes (which he seldom turns into action, or if he does, finds that they go awry); but this is not a hereditary familial trait, and Molly does not share it, and there is no Rudy to learn it.

The unity of the family in the *Odyssey* is strengthened because of the presence and activity of the gods: they defend it, and they also serve as the paradigm for it. The gods embody the aristocracy of peace time.⁷ There is order on Olympus, and the "cloud gatherer" is also the *paterfamilias*; there is no question about his supremacy in the family of the gods and in the family of man. Once he has determined that Odysseus will return and punish the suitors, there is no doubt that his decision will be fulfilled. At the same time, Zeus respects and recognizes the grievances of the other gods, particularly Poseidon: he permits the long delay and does not discuss Odysseus's return until Poseidon is gone, out of deference to his eminence. When it is time to fulfill the prophecy concerning the Phaiakians, he strikes a very cordial compromise with his divine brother.⁸ There is here an order, a *kosmos*, and it is of a clearly familial nature.

This unity is preserved even at the lowest level of Homer's triple-decker universe. In Hades, Odysseus can encounter Antikleia, recognize her, and identify her as his mother, from his land, and with reference to her father, Autolykos. He questions her about his father, son, wife, and inheritance; she reassures him about Penelope and Telemachus, but tells him that Laertes, like her, is suffering from grief. Again, it is in the family, in its natural order and organization, that one makes the most important value judgments in the poem. This order is reinforced almost immediately as Odysseus witnesses a parade of the mothers of the great heroes of Greek mythology; they are identified precisely as consorts of certain gods and mothers of heroes who were, in turn, founders of famous cities and families. The emphasis is clearly and pointedly genealogical and familial.

In *Ulysses*, no gods safeguard the family or assist the modern hero. Bloom is utterly on his own. The paradigm for the family in Christian Dublin in 1904 would be the Holy Family, vastly different from the Homeric unit, and realistically impossible as a model for any family: a divine Father; a virgin Mother; a Son hypostatistically united to the Second Person of the Trinity, who became man, conceived through the operation of the Holy Spirit; and a Foster Father who was no more than a companion and protector of the Son and the Mother. To Dublin unbelievers, the unit is grotesque, outlandish, absurd. Buck Mulligan expresses the relationships blasphemously in "The Ballad of Joking Jesus":

—*I'm the queerest young fellow that ever you heard.
My mother's a jew, my father's a bird.*⁹

Stephen Dedalus recalls it in terms of a joke, evidently picked up from Léo Taxil:

—*Qui vous a mis dans cette fichue position?
—C'est le pigeon, Joseph.*¹⁰

Bloom's misunderstanding of the model Christian family is typical of his muddled view of things:

—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.

—He had no father, says Martin. . . .

—Well, his uncle was a jew, says he. Your God was a jew. Christ was a jew like me.¹¹

As usual, out of a jumble of errors Bloom eventually stumbles on the truth: Christ was a Jew, like Bloom. But Bloom cannot accurately define or outline the unit and its relationships, and he is joined in error by Martin Cunningham who, as a Catholic, should know better.¹²

Joyce's Hades, in contrast to Homer's, does not reflect the unity of the family—rather, the reverse. Bloom's companions on the way to Glasnevin are anything but model husbands and fathers: Simon Dedalus, the self-indulgent widower, does not look after his children; Martin Cunningham's wife is a drunkard; Jack Power neglects his sickly wife and keeps a barmaid as his mistress. At Glasnevin, Bloom does not encounter his mother. There is no parade of mothers reflective of genealogical lines; no ghosts of mighty heroes show concern for their families. Instead, Simon Dedalus sentimentally weeps as he nears the grave of his wife, and the Parnellites pay superstitious homage at the grave of their dead chief. In contrast to Homer, Joyce persistently stresses the absence of family ties, the breakdown of familial units.

A central point of the *Odyssey* is to bring about a *kosmos* in the family unit of Odysseus reflective of the heavenly paradigm. The poem begins *in medias res*, and the emphasis is on homecoming—and that is never lost sight of. We know right from the proem that Odysseus's companions will not return home, largely through their own fault; but the disorder in the hero's household must be eliminated; the vacuum created by his absence must be filled; and these can be accomplished only by his return, with the aid of Athena and the sanction of Zeus. Thus it is time to move—the council of the gods decrees it, and the action of the poem begins its great centripetal movement toward the reintegration of the family of Odysseus. The gods' decree is reaffirmed by prophecy after prophecy, portent after portent, right up to the moment he is reunited with his father. The outcome is never in doubt. There is no suspense relative to the outcome: the only questions are when, how, where, with whose assistance or in spite of whose opposition. The movement towards reunion, reintegration, is natural, necessary, and foreordained.

In *Ulysses*, however, there can be no such *kosmos*. The modern Odysseus can return to his Penelope, Molly: but she has broken faith with him; Athena will not hold back the dawn so that he can tell his wife of his adventures; they do not, as Homer tells us of Penelope and Odysseus, resume the ritual of their lovemaking,

which has been interrupted by his twenty-year absence—instead, they continue the “period of 10 years, 5 months and 18 days” in which their lovemaking has been characterized by its severe “limitation.”¹³ Joyce’s Odysseus can return bringing with him Stephen; but the young Dedalus is not Bloom’s natural son and, in our view, the meeting is not productive—for Stephen leaves, and Bloom remains alone amid “The cold of interstellar space . . .”¹⁴ There can be no trio of Laertes, Odysseus, and Telemachus to assert the power and reclaim the prestige of the household. Joyce’s hero, placed beside Homer’s, is truly a man bereft, deprived—of father, of son, of a reliable family unit. There is no homecoming in the Homeric sense, no divinely foreordained reestablishment of the family *kosmos*. Bloom’s meeting with Stephen and his return to Molly are not natural, and they are necessary and foreordained only insofar as Joyce, the artist, decrees them, arranges them, and manipulates them

Joyce’s failure, or refusal, to parallel Homer more closely is indicative of significant differences between the worlds the authors inhabit, the worlds they create, and their artistic aims and achievements. Homer’s world—though fraught with peril, suffering, and death—is, nevertheless, presumed to be naturally ordered and harmonious.¹⁵ Though his heroes experience great misery and pain, their place in this world is clear and, ultimately, secure. The order and harmony of Homer’s poem reflect the lucidity of his vision and the clarity and stability of his heroic world. Joyce’s world is broken, fragmented, chaotic. In it man is not secure, does not feel at home. The only true clarity, order, and harmony possible, then, for Joyce, are those contrived and carefully wrought by the artist—not reflecting an ordered *kosmos*, but creating one in defiance of a disordered one. In the *Odyssey*, the reader marvels at and learns from the cleverness and courageous achievements of the artist’s hero; in *Ulysses*, with full awareness of the Homeric parallel, the reader is compelled to acknowledge the achievement of the cunning, ingenious, and heroic artist.

NOTES

¹We do not intend any judgment on the much-argued “Homeric Question.” We accept the text as it has been handed down. A recent treatment of variations on Homer’s Odysseus, to which we are indebted, is Derek Stanford’s *The Ulysses Theme* (New York: Oxford, 1954).

²Contrasting examples stressed in the poem of disorder and breach of the aristocratic code are the behavior of the suitors and the barbarity of Polyphemos, a barbarian among barbarians, for he is a loner and has no family.

³There are, of course, many differences between Molly and Penelope; these have been dealt with, and there seems no need to summarize them here.

⁴There are variations on the genealogies of many heroes. Homer has his own version and is consistent in his use of it. An expanded genealogy can be found in C. Kerényi, *The Heroes of the Greeks*, trans. H. J. Rose (New York, 1962), p. 368.

⁵Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (New York: Oxford, 1959), esp. pp. 383-384.

⁶Frank Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of ‘Ulysses.’* (London: Grayson & Grayson, 1937), esp. pp. 15-17, 191.

⁷By the time of the *Odyssey* the Greek pantheon is fairly well organized and is not the divided and somewhat independent group of deities we remember from the *Iliad*. In the earlier poem the gods reflected the specific virtue of that world, the world of the warrior; cf. Jaeger's *Paideia* I, "Nobility and Areté."

⁸Again one notes the change from the *Iliad*. This is not the wild pantheon which could be controlled only with the constant threat of the all-destructive thunderbolt or other forms of violence, and which could achieve at best an uncertain equilibrium in the midst of divine stupidity, favoritism, deceit, and chicanery.

⁹*Ulysses* (New York: Random House, 1961), p. 19.

¹⁰*Ulysses*, p. 41.

¹¹*Ulysses*, p. 342.

¹²Bloom also is in error about the Jewishness of Mercadante and the orthodoxy of the others he lists, as Robert Martin Adams has noted in *Surface and Symbol* (New York: Oxford 1967), pp. 197-198. This is indicative of the dimness of Bloom's view of his heritage.

¹³*Ulysses*, p. 736.

¹⁴*Ulysses*, p. 704.

¹⁵The many strata in the poem reflecting the long process of composition and final writing-down do not challenge its unity in this sense.