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“See Ourselves as Others See Us”: Empathy Across Gender Boundaries in James Joyce’s Ulysses

Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank Dr. Lee Garver of Butler University’s Department of English for his editing assistance and guidance on the craft of this paper. This paper was inspired by Dr. Garver’s seminar on James Joyce’s Ulysses.

"SEE OURSELVES AS OTHERS SEE US": EMPATHY ACROSS GENDER BOUNDARIES IN JAMES JOYCE'S *ULYSSES*

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Abstract

Many critics originally attacked James Joyce's *Ulysses* for its dark representation of gender relations. Today, many scholars consider this criticism prematurely formed and recognize that these early critics responded more to Stephen Dedalus's antagonistic, misogynistic views in the novel's opinion chapters than to the rest of the epic and the views of the novel's main protagonist, Leopold Bloom, who displays a much more receptive, appreciative attitude toward women. These scholars now believe that gender relations as portrayed in *Ulysses* actually undermine preconceived notions of a gendered hierarchy. However, this difference in character perspective is not the only or even the most important way that the novel challenges gender hierarchies. In addition to the shift in character perspective, Joyce's epic also includes a narrative arc that uses sexuality as a metaphor, transforming Bloom's various sexual encounters—namely those with Gerty McDowell, Bella Cohen, and Molly Bloom—into a commentary on how intimate sexual interactions between genders can not only potentially help men and women transcend structures and preconceived notions of separation but can also enable greater depth of perception, both empathetically and artistically.

The bifurcation of the hitherto single order of sensed-experience into the two orders of thought-existence and real-existence matches precisely that emergence of dual agencies, opposite but related, which supervened upon the organic world in the principle of propagation of organic species by the joint action of male and female...Both create their antithetically related differences out of powers which basically are homogenous and one. (Dora Marsden, "Our Philosophy of the 'Real'" (1918), qtd. in Stearns 469)

This statement by early twentieth-century feminist and magazine editor Dora Marsden first appeared in the May 1918 edition of her periodical *The Egoist* (1914-1919) as part of her article "Our Philosophy of the 'Real.'" This

article was directed against James Joyce, whose *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* she had published serially in the same periodical from 1914-1915. In “Our Philosophy,” Marsden accused Joyce of failing to provide an appropriate perspective on gender relations in the opening chapters of *Ulysses*, which had been published serially in *The Little Review* in the winter and spring of 1918. In Marsden’s view, the fictional reality presented in these early chapters was one in which material and social reality was composed of irreconcilably antagonistic forces, from abstract concepts such as subject and object to more biologically based concepts such as male and female. Joyce’s portrayal of men and women as opposing forces with seemingly little inclination toward “homogeneity” or “oneness” especially irked Marsden. She found Stephen Dedalus’s dark, resentful perception of the world around him—particularly his deeply anxious ambivalence regarding gender—to be grossly skewed, as it casts women in the highly unfavorable light of an inimical force that hinders men like Stephen from achieving their true potential as masculine subjects and artists. “Our Philosophy,” then, was written not only to address this perceived fault in Joyce’s narrative but also to elucidate Marsden’s own philosophy on the matter of gender—that, like so many other binaries, men and women are complements to each other and are not intended to be opposing forces or segregated ranks of a gendered hierarchy.

However, as Thaine Stearns argues, Marsden, like many other critics who cast judgments after reading only the first few chapters of *Ulysses*, was mistaken in her opinion of Joyce. The emergence of Leopold Bloom as the central protagonist of *Ulysses* presents a philosophical outlook on reality quite different from that expressed by Stephen, one that is less disparaging and more enthusiastically appreciative of women. As Stearns notes, Joyce actually shared many of Marsden’s views regarding gender relations, both from a literary and a philosophical standpoint, and “the idea of existence as divided into two opposing realms as a persisting construction to be undermined” (470). The evidence of their shared beliefs, Stearns claims, is evident in the irony of Joyce’s portrayal of Stephen in the opening three chapters—an irony that, Stearns suspects, Marsden either missed or chose to ignore for the sake of her own argument (470)—and also in the gradual turn of the novel’s focus from Stephen and his perception of a gender-segregated reality to Bloom’s all-encompassing view of and immersion in the world.

Yet, while Stearns’s argument holds value in clarifying Joyce’s literary stance on gender relations, Stearns does not carry his defense of Joyce beyond the sheer juxtaposition of Stephen’s and Bloom’s respective attitudes toward women. On a deeper level of narrative structure, Joyce “undermines”

gender binaries through the use of sexuality as a pervading metaphor. While sex, the most intimate interaction between genders, may appear to be little more than a part of the novel's realistic depiction of Dublin life in 1904, sexuality as a central reoccurring metaphor in *Ulysses* actually evolves into a greater psychological commentary on gender relations through the narrative arc of Bloom's various sexual encounters with the feminine, namely Gerty MacDowell, Bella Cohen, and his own wife, Molly. On the subject of gender relations, then, *Ulysses* ultimately explores and presents a case on how intimate interactions between genders can potentially not only help men and women transcend gender conventions and preconceived notions of separation and antagonism between the sexes but can also enable greater depth and scope of perception, both as empathetic human beings and as artists.

In her examination of literary translation, Joyce scholar Francine Masiello acknowledges that sex is often used in Joyce's work to evoke comprehensions beyond the immediate and the literal. As a famously taboo subject with a long (and continuing) history of controversy and moral sensitivity, sex naturally serves a fitting role in drawing attention to situations of "disclosure and misrepresentation" in literature, particularly situations in which "binary units are kept in long-range suspension without any real claim in truth" (57). Masiello references Leo Bersani and his analysis of sex as a metaphor to note how physical love, in the way she earlier observed about binaries, is often "a form of self-shattering, a way to practice nonviolent disruption of categories of identity and the authority of institutional power" (57). By virtue of the destruction of self and our own perceived sense of identity in the act of lovemaking, new identities—or at least new understandings of identity—are able to form. The way to overcome such rigidly established binaries as hierarchized social roles based upon gender, then, in terms of Marsden's (and Joyce's) philosophy on perception, is to break the perceived barrier that defines people as strictly masculine or feminine.

In this way, the act of sex, as Masiello interprets it in examining various Spanish translations of *Ulysses*, becomes a possible means to overcoming difference and achieving unity by effecting a state of gender (and identity) fluidity: "One's fixed position in the world is overturned in sexual surrender, just as one loses a sense of self when one crosses national borders...when one surrenders repeatedly to what is foreign. This also occurs when gender assignments change and when roles flow freely without restriction" (57). To overcome opposition as established through rigidly defined understandings of what is masculine and what is feminine, then, is to alleviate tensions that

allow one gender (usually male) to dominate aggressively the other (usually female). Sex, or at least the “unnamable quality of sexuality” (57) that diminishes awareness of distinct physical entities, potentially permits this sundering of gender boundaries through the elimination of distance and through mutual participation in intimate interaction, when whether one is male or female no longer matters, only that two beings are meeting in a union of time and space.

In *Ulysses*, “Circe” is the chapter in which switches of gender appear to take place between Bloom and Bella Cohen. Consequently, this chapter is the ultimate crux where the question of Joyce’s treatment of the so-called gender binary is truly put to the test. Long before “Circe,” though, Joyce prepares the metaphorical ground and argument for the deconstruction of gender binary through the juxtaposition of Stephen’s hardened misogynistic perception of women and Leopold Bloom’s ready appreciation of and sympathy for women. The focal point about which Joyce constructs this dichotomy is the complete liberal enjoyment of sexuality on Bloom’s part and the utterly repressive, desperate avoidance of sex on Stephen’s part.

As established in the preceding novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen’s sole experience of sexuality is through prostitution, a transaction that, while enabling the physical intimacy of sexual intercourse, is fundamentally lacking in empathy because the participants are locked within strictly defined gender roles and are engaging in an economic exchange. In exploring Joyce’s dramatic craft in the “Circe” chapter, Austin Briggs draws a connection between playhouses and brothels, arguing that both actors and prostitutes are entertainers paid to assume personalities and effect scenarios for the audience’s/client’s gratification: “To varying degrees, sexual relationships involve role playing, the fantasy that is central to the stage and the brothel alike” (56). Although role play or performance may arguably be an inescapable, natural component of gender construction and sexuality, prostitution runs a particularly high risk of disabled empathy across gender boundaries because sex is manipulated to meet the demands of an industry in which “prostitutes perform *act* the role of whore in compliance with the desires of others” (50). Under these circumstances, then, Stephen’s engagement with prostitutes cannot achieve any level of real intimacy, spiritual awakening, and artistic inspiration because the entire interaction is a paid performance in which conventional gender binaries are rigidly maintained.

As his overall retreat from sexuality demonstrates, Stephen finds his experience with prostitutes unfulfilling and, more importantly, shaming.

Part of his shame is linked with his overall inability to mature past the restricted mother-son connection to develop emotional, physical relationships with other women. However, a larger part of his shame is due to the fact that Stephen's perception of the world is restricted to the cold lens of intellect, a perception first promoted through his religiously strict tutelage and his mother's Catholic-abiding influence. Desiring to shake off all controlling influences yet unable to escape the guilt and shame that those influences have inflicted upon his sexuality, Stephen conditions himself to consider the world strictly by limited abstract, *oppositional* concepts—correct and incorrect, fair and unfair, moral and immoral, *male and female*—and in order to embrace one, he rejects the other entirely.

The effects of such a cruelly narrowed, starkly segregated perception of life start to manifest themselves at the end of *Portrait of the Artist* with Stephen's confusion and distance from all women, including his own mother. With the start of *Ulysses*, though, Stephen's ambiguity regarding sex and the feminine turns into hardened chauvinism. In the opening three chapters of the epic, Stephen expresses a deep mistrust and resentment of the feminine. Women for him are either sources of temptation and self-degradation, as with the prostitutes, or coldly imperial despots, ruling from afar, as with his now deceased mother and the Blessed Virgin Mary. Mrs. Dedalus, in particular, becomes an oppressive, punitive force for Stephen throughout the novel. She continually surfaces in Stephen's mind, reaching beyond the grave to guilt him back into a state of, as Stephen perceives it, cowed obedience, "[h]er eyes on [him] to strike [him] down" for refusing to pray at her deathbed (9). As a means to combat what, in his rebellious mind, should be an unnecessary guilt, Stephen's wariness of women develops into a conviction that women are morally corrosive to man's spirit. They are man's very opponent by the difference of gender and are "unclean" by virtue of being "man's flesh made not in God's likeness" (12).

Such wording, embedded in religious argument, establishes a hierarchy that readily reflects the viewpoint of many people in the midst of predominantly Catholic, masculine Dublin. What Stephen's thought elucidates is that men, by virtue of being crafted "in God's likeness," are conceivably elevated to a state of innate grandeur and superiority, at least in the eyes of Dublin society. Women, then, being different in form than man, counter God and are naturally more susceptible to evil and its snares. Their only purpose (or, in a cruder sense, function) is then the necessary evil of reproduction. But even this indispensable function proves to be regarded only as a greater evil, as women, in Stephen's extremism, are portrayed as

contagions of the same moral sickness by fault of the original sin: “But it was the original sin that darkened his [Shakespeare’s] understanding, weakened his will and left in him a strong inclination to evil...An original sin and, like original sin, committed by another in whose sin he too has sinned” (174). By this reasoning, woman, as the “another” who committed the first sin, not only condemns man as her husband to sin by offering him the same temptation the serpent offered Eve but also condemns man, as being born of her flesh, to a sin that becomes an inescapable, innate part of him. Women, then, are to be avoided and shunned, as they have already burdened mankind with a terrible moral struggle, and Stephen readily does so by devoting himself wholly to a company of likeness in cold-reasoning masculinity, accomplishing his own ideal of paradise as expressed in his Hamlet arguments: “[I]n the economy of heaven,...there are no more marriages, glorified man, an androgynous angel, being a wife unto himself” (175).

This last statement, vehement though it is in its express disregard for women in paradise, proves, in fact, to be a subtle turning point in Stephen’s argument, a ghostly trace to the true argument that Joyce will ultimately present and defend in the “Circe” chapter. While appearing to advocate for masculine superiority and feminine inferiority, this statement of Stephen’s actually proves the counterpoint—that women are not excised from the “economy of heaven” but are incorporated into it, being a necessary part of paradise and the completion of man’s androgynously angelic soul. By nulling women, Stephen nulls the one thing that leads to the true appreciation and manifestation of art: contrast. Having limited himself to the familiar, the uniform, and the same by aggrandizing what resembles himself and uplifting only that which is himself—his masculinity, his intellect, his ideals, his grandeur—Stephen unwittingly represses his artistic potential to a narrow plane that inevitably reverts back to himself. Without contrast, he has nothing by which he may reflect upon himself in order to verify or correct his perception. He is shut off from greater sensation and inspiration that may lead him to artistic truth. As a result, while he has ambition to create and has attempted to create, he has yet to succeed in producing what might be considered art. The only way by which he may possibly cure himself, both in sex and in art, as Elliott B. Gose, Jr. argues in *The Transformation Process in Joyce’s Ulysses*, is “to give himself more to life and other human beings” (113), i.e., to open himself up to women, man’s complementary contrast.

The ultimate trial and proof of this supposed solution is Joyce’s introduction of *Ulysses*’s contrasting protagonist, Leopold Bloom. Compared

to Stephen's thoughts, Bloom's are less judgmental and more sympathetic concerning women. In fact, while the majority of Stephen's thoughts are driven by self-analyses and critical self-comparisons with other men, Bloom's inner contemplations are shaped predominantly by women, a fact that reflects a subsequent depth and richness of narrative in Bloom's chapters versus Stephen's. Indeed, Bloom exhibits a greater interest in women than he does in fellow male company, case and point in his encounter with Mr. M'Coy, whom Bloom finds more a bothersome distraction compared to a woman flashing her silk stocking while climbing into the carriage across the street (60-61).

More importantly, though, Bloom's mental contemplations of women detail not only a ready appreciation of physical beauty but also a certain level of compassion for women. Juxtaposed to Stephen's cold consideration of his mother as an antagonist, Bloom exhibits a certain understanding for Mrs. Dedalus's plight as a wife and devout Catholic while he observes Stephen's malnourished sister: "Home always breaks up when the mother goes. Fifteen children he [Mr. Dedalus] had. Birth every year almost. That's in their theology or the priest won't give the poor woman the confession, the absolution. Increase and multiply...Eat you out of house and home" (124). Though his consideration of Mrs. Dedalus is only a momentary focus of his inner monologue, Bloom's thoughts portray Mrs. Dedalus in a manner which Stephen has refused to see her—that of victim to a male-dominated society and religion. The same contemplation applies in Bloom's consideration of pregnant Mrs. Purefoy:

Poor Mrs [sic] Purefoy!...Poor thing!...Three days imagine groaning on a bed with a vinegared handkerchief round her forehead, her belly swollen out. Phew! Dreadful simply! Child's head too big: forceps. Doubled up inside her trying to butt its way out blindly, groping for the way out. Kill me that would...They ought to invent something to stop that. Life with hard labour. (132)

While Stephen expresses little consideration for the feelings of a woman, Bloom demonstrates a shocking ability to understand, or at least to imagine, the incredible pain and difficulty women endure when bound to men for the sole purpose of childbearing and childrearing, as society has defined appropriate for their gender.

In tandem with Bloom's consideration of women, then, men become a wild combination of the ridiculous, the crude, the gruesome, and the monstrous. Stopping into a local eatery, Bloom perceives men "shovel[ing]

gurgling soup down [their] gullet[s]...spitting... halfmasticated gristle” (138), the imagery violent and animalistic with ripping bites, spilling fluids, and raw stench. Bloom, disgusted, leaves the establishment in search of another, firmly convinced the philosophy of men is to “[e]at or be eaten. Kill! Kill!” (139). This glimpse into Bloom’s impression of his own gender, immediately following a romanticized image of sexually receptive women, strikes a starkly negative image compared to Stephen’s glorified idea of male artists as androgynous angels. However, what is most striking about this scene in its sharp opposition to Stephen’s own views is the fact that, by virtue of Bloom’s romantic feminine vision contrasting with the gross masculine reality, Bloom finds himself reflecting upon his own self and his own gender in a new light. “Am I like that?” he ponders. “See ourselves as others see us” (139).

Bloom’s recognition of otherness, combined with his willingness to embrace that difference, enables a broader, more universal perspective than what Stephen and all his intellect and repressed sexuality can conjure. Bloom’s ability to imagine otherness indicates an ability to accept and to empathize, a freedom to engage with life and others in life. Stephen, having reduced himself to pure, cold intellect, cannot tap into his soul and can create little more than sheer wordplay, as he makes no extension beyond his immediate egoist self to discover new perspectives that could awaken his inspiration, challenge his character into new developments, and aid in his artistic inclinations by broadening the scope of his artistic perception. Bloom, on the other hand, can tap into his soul, and he is able to do so because he reaches willingly beyond himself to find the beauty in what is theoretically opposite of him: woman, the feminine. Indeed, this distinction between the characters in terms of their views of opposites is a more fundamental way to define their ultimate differences regarding sexuality. As Gose asserts, “It is contradictions that are destroying Stephen, while Bloom is spending all his time trying to resolve them” (169). In that respect, Bloom’s thoughts and observations of the world are more vivid, more inventive, more encompassing, and more alive. His is the perception of a true artist and the aesthetic foundation of the entire novel.

Of the numerous sexual experiences elucidated throughout *Ulysses*, Bloom’s transformational adventure in “Circe” demonstrates most vividly this ability to embrace and reconcile opposites and Bloom’s more encompassing artistic outlook. Rooted in the highly sexualized scene of the brothel, “Circe” becomes, in many ways, the climax of *Ulysses*. Bloom and Stephen finally meet, and each character arguably reaches his lowest point, encountering

women in a conceivably antagonistic way. However, “Circe” is also the one point in the novel where, by virtue of the very role play that renders prostitution inefficient to inspire artistic spirit, “all opposites collapse” and genders are exposed as a matter of “pure difference, signifiers without any substance behind them” (Masiello 58). In this episode, Joyce demonstrates through fantasy how each man imagines women as antagonistic forces. (The longest of *Ulysses*’s eighteen chapters, “Circe” carries Bloom through a range of fantasized transformations, from the elevated stature of a powerful political figure to the degraded level of an animalistic *female* slave.)

Now, the fact that so much of this episode is rooted in Bloom’s fantasy may, at first, appear to undermine any sexual/artistic argument Joyce may be attempting to make, especially one that subverts gender conventions. However, Michael Sinding proposes the opposite in his consideration of how Joyce wrote the text in not only dramatic format but also with the intention of a fantastical imagination:

[T]he frame [dream or hallucination] is used not to supply content, exactly, nor to supply form, exactly, but rather to provide a basis for accessing, selecting, and expressing a certain content. That is, Joyce mines the subconscious minds of Bloom and Stephen and works their deep-seated desires and fears into hyperbolic fantasies. (602)

By rooting parts of the “Circe” episode in the subconscious, Joyce implies an innate quality to the hallucinations, drawn-out characteristics embedded so deeply within Bloom’s mind that they are beyond his immediate conscious control and must be provoked. In this way, then, “Circe” may be evaluated as a legitimate and, indeed, intentional point of argument in questioning gender, as it relates to identity.

In this episode, a number of revelations concerning Bloom’s various manifestations of sexuality come to light through confessions and various imagined transformations: the full extent of his epistolary relations with Martha (Joyce 379-81), an attempt to solicit sexual favors from a domestic employee (375-76), and experiments in cross-dressing, including impersonating women in his high school play (438) and trying on his wife’s clothes (437). Chief among these confessions that leads to his immersion in the brothel scene, though, is his outcry of “O, I so want to be a mother” and subsequent fantasy of birthing eight children (403). This first transformation into the feminine ties directly back to his aforementioned sympathy for Mrs. Purefoy in painful child labor. Where before his imagination was contained to the privacy of his thoughts, Bloom’s thoughts are explicitly revealed in the

brothel. He suddenly becomes exposed through a number of evolving fantastical scenarios that become frightening, shocking, even humiliating, as he falls from being powerful to being powerless, from being a well-respected man to being a woman auctioned off much like an animal would be (440).

Bloom's transformation into and subsequent abuse as a woman at masculinized Bello's hands may appear to be anything but a sympathetic gesture toward women. If anything, this dark setting of "Circe" may strike a horrifying note of degradation and abuse for women, as if Bloom's fantastical self-envisagement as a prostitute subjected to masochism may be considered more an indication of what he as a man would like to do to a woman. However, regarding the psychological framework of "Circe" as a whole, this latter part of Bloom's fantastical journey may actually prove his empathy for women and his subsequent creative potential on a profoundly personal level, for his ability to imagine himself as a woman indicates a potential release from self-repression, as opposed to Stephen. As Gose notes:

Bloom in 'Circe' drops his pride altogether and plays all parts: father and son, hero and victim, reformer and dictator, authority and buffoon, idealist and carnalist, exhibitionist and voyeur, sadist and masochist, man and woman. Unlike Ulysses, who remained a man throughout his sojourn with Circe, Bloom becomes an animal (several animals, in fact). But like all his other transformations, this one is only in passing, and he emerges from his various metamorphoses more of a whole human being than he began. (151)

What Gose suggests in this comment is that Bloom's various transformations and diverse array of self-conceptions are actually innate, *natural* parts of himself. By recognizing them and, in a way, embracing them, he is able to triumph over them and emerge from the brothel in stronger command of himself. He does not succumb to the temptation of marketable sex, thus preserving his marriage while maintaining an appreciation of the feminine and his own sexuality.

Stephen, on the other hand, keeps the diverse facets of himself segregated and never acknowledges them as a part of his whole, having continuously buried his sexuality as an *unnatural* part of himself. Hence, when confronted by his mother's ghost, his ultimate reaction is to strike out at her, to sunder her tormenting spirit. Thus unable to accept his sexuality without frightful self-repression, Stephen undoes himself as an artist. The cruel censorship of his body and his mind represses his appreciation for contrast, an element natural and necessary for truly compelling art. The

exploration of contrast is what ultimately enables sympathy and potentially empathy to develop, as comprehension of the “other” occurs through a transformation of perception such as art strives to achieve. Having suppressed an appreciation for contrast in himself, then, Stephen cannot possibly appreciate contrast in the world around him and, therefore, cannot possibly create art. He has limited his scope of the world to the shallow realm of his own ego, which reflects in his inability to sympathize with others, as previously mentioned with Mrs. Purefoy in her labor and his own dead mother. Indeed, throughout *Ulysses*, Stephen unwittingly isolates himself further and further, not only from women through his sexual repression but also from his own male artists and former schoolmates, most of whom grow to regard him as an arrogant, outlandishly pedagogic fool with little viable success to his name.

Bloom, by comparison, ultimately discovers the key to his artistic spirit in his fierce inner conflict and triumph in “Circe,” being able, as Mark Shechner phrases it, to “hermaphrodize” himself and bring the fragments of his personality into a unified whole (123). In this manner, Joyce’s whole construction of “Circe” becomes an elaborate “construct of opposites,” in which identity is formed from multiple parts into one: “Joyce’s splitting of Bloom’s personality is in the cause of a more authentic unity. He subjects Bloom to a grotesque purging of those ‘inferior’ parts of his nature that, though unconscious, have been dominating Bloom’s behavior. Bloom emerges as a more integrated and authoritative person precisely after experiencing his worst transformations” (Gose 162).

Now, an objection might be raised on this front. Like the majority of Bloom’s previous romantic excursions, the transformations and subsequent unity of identity occur largely within the safety of Bloom’s private thoughts. As such, the encounters in “Circe” are little different than Bloom’s written correspondence with Martha or his beach voyeurism with Gerty. However, what must be noted is how Bloom’s imagination is galvanized to unleash his subconscious in the context of the brothel, a highly physical scene where sexuality is much more immediately present than in his previously distant encounters. As such, his imaginative sojourn in “Circe” may be viewed as pivotal, for he comes to embrace his own sense of self in all its diverse dimensions.

With this understanding of “Circe” established, the contextual framework of Bloom’s relations with Gerty MacDowell in “Nausicaa” and Molly in “Penelope” for Joyce’s rhetorical use of sex in *Ulysses* may gain greater clarity. Bloom encounters many women throughout the novel, but

Gerty and Molly are singular as, firstly, they are the only women in *Ulysses* for whom Joyce crafts vibrant inner monologues and, secondly, they are the only women with whom Bloom has direct interactions, exempting the prostitute in “Circe.” Between the two women, though, Joyce establishes a dichotomy of failed versus successful connection based on Bloom’s physical distance with one woman and his intimate proximity and lovemaking with the other. Admittedly, in “Nausicaa,” both Gerty’s and Bloom’s thoughts are elucidated, allowing for a clear analysis as to their failure of connection. In “Penelope,” only Molly’s thoughts are divulged, resulting in a potentially biased assumption as to the exact level of success regarding Bloom and Molly’s final relationship. However, a certain reference to one of Bloom’s memories revealed earlier in *Ulysses*, in addition to the end of the “Ithaca” episode preceding “Penelope,” reveals telling information about Bloom’s own thoughts and sentiments toward Molly that will ultimately align with hers and prove the validity of intimate connection through Molly’s concluding, resounding “Yes.” But first, an elucidation of this connection must be established through juxtaposition with its failed opposite: Gerty MacDowell.

While possessing a highly sentimental narrative voice in “Nausicaa,” Gerty expresses a clear ideal as to what she desires from a relationship—a true romance of tender love and passion, in which the heart prevails: “Heart of mine! She would follow, her dream of love, the dictates of her heart that told her he [Bloom] was her all in all, the only man in all the world for her for love was the master guide. Nothing else mattered. Come what might she would be wild, untrammelled, free” (Joyce 299). In Gerty’s mind, love and married life are to be her avenues to sexual freedom. She imagines she will find bliss in a sanctioned union, as she believes she will be free to express and manifest her love without fear of shame or repercussions. During her encounter with Bloom, though, Gerty maintains a teasingly respectful distance, engaging with him through subtle glances and various glimpses of her feminine figure. This carefully controlled interaction concurs with her belief that, so long as she does not do “the other thing,” she may freely indulge in sexual tension and trust absolutism to clear her of any true blame (300).

The fatal misconception of Gerty’s romantic fantasies, unlike Bloom’s in “Circe,” is that her fantasies are not so much a means to self-assessment and self-acceptance as they are to self-evasion. In her comparative analysis of Joyce’s play on Homer’s Nausicaa in *The Odyssey* and Samuel Butler’s own take of Nausicaa as the imagined narrator of *The Odyssey*, Timo Müller notes how Gerty’s thoughts construct her own image, much like how Butler’s

Nausicaa creates a masked portrayal of herself in *The Odyssey* behind which she as the narrator hides and operates. In this way, Gerty's thoughts, rather than exposing a deeper subconscious, mask her true nature:

Gerty appears...unrealistic in her insistence on the idealized Victorian image of marriage as a blissful partnership of a caring husband and a pure, self-sacrificing wife...Barred as she is from the pleasures of real-life wealth, harmony, and lovemaking, she resorts to the fictional mode of mental self-fashioning as a substitute. (387)

This "escapism," as Müller goes on to phrase Gerty's "self-fashioning," readily places the voyeuristic connection between Gerty and Bloom at a disadvantage. Gerty conceals herself and deflects deeper insight into her being by a show of idealism, rather than allowing Bloom as the onlooker a deeper comprehension of her nature. Her fantasies do not descend into the dark, chaotic, torturous aspects or potential of herself as Bloom's do in "Circe" but remain in the light, romantic field of admiration and glory.

Part of this fantasy may be influenced by Gerty's obsession with societal standards. Müller notes how, like Butler's Nausicaa, Gerty exhibits a keen awareness of social propriety, particularly as crafted by religion. Yet she is eager to partake in a sexual transaction of sorts. This, Müller argues, shows that Gerty, while she may not actually be afraid to bend the rules, is preoccupied with the need not to be perceived as breaking those rules: "She disapproves not of the action itself (going about with a stranger) but of the scandal it might cause...not of being 'familiar' with a man but of showing it 'in the face of all the world'" (383). An adherence to societal standards that subverts a consummation of love (or at least what Gerty imagines and professes to be love) then brings to question the true validity of this supposed love. Indeed, one must question whether Gerty's ideal of love is even a genuine idea—one occurring to her—or one implanted through the rigid indoctrination of society and church.¹

Her preference to maintain distance while physically tantalizing Bloom lends a certain amount of credence to her confessed belief that, by not actually having sex, she is breaking no rules. However, Gerty's concept of

¹ Though his article focuses predominantly on Molly Bloom and the additional Greek-Roman parallel of Gaea-Tellus, Erwin R. Steinberg does devote a good portion of his commentary to how the Catholic church in Ireland "misdirected" Irish women's perception of sexuality and cites a number of textual examples concerning the practice of confession (124) that demonstrate the church's perversely "sterilizing" and "contraceptive" influence (123).

sexuality proves to be founded on a quaint image that diverts away from sex entirely and focuses solely on the allure of distant attraction. She expresses clearly that she does not desire “soldiers and coarse men with no respect for a girl’s honour,” but what she then confesses to desiring is the sort of man with whom she and he would be “just good friends like a big brother and sister without all the other in spite of the conventions of Society with a capital ess” (299). This mentality almost equates Gerty’s thoughts with the psychology of a child. She has not yet learned how to separate and differentiate the platonic love of siblings or even parents [as her desire for an older man over a young “prince charming” suggests a paternal equivalence (288)] from the sexual love of a partner of her own. Her imagination of sexuality is limited to tight embraces and deep kisses, and her sexual expression is limited to sheer voyeurism, when she allows Bloom, still sitting off at a safe distance, a glimpse up her skirt (300).

In this way, Gerty cannot possibly have any true concept of sexuality other than what is fed to her through society’s cultural and religious instruction. Her sexual image, then, despite its relative success in stimulating Bloom, is pure imitation.² By her distance from Bloom sexually, Gerty is unable to inspire anything truly artistic within him because she herself “achieves nothing original or even remotely interesting” and only succeeds in “expos[ing] her vanity and mediocrity” (Müller 384). In short, unlike Briggs’ earlier referenced descriptions of well-trained prostitutes, Gerty amounts to little more than a cheap show of flesh, whose image can be (and is) readily destroyed and forgotten by her limp.

Bloom, as the latter half of “Nausicaa” reveals, is not at all the man whom Gerty believes “could be trusted to the death, steadfast, a sterling man, a man of inflexible honour to his fingertips” (Joyce 299). Firstly, Bloom is a married man, an important detail of which Gerty is unaware and to which David M. Schaps draws particular attention when pointing out the irony of the original Nausicaa-Odysseus interaction—that Odysseus, like Bloom, is driven more by need of relief than a shared romantic interest (225-26). Secondly, upon perceiving that Gerty is, to put it crudely, physically defective, Bloom’s previous admiration converts to what seems to be a certain

² Sam Slote examines an artistic rivalry between James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* in terms of genre as a reflection of narrative style and how women as writers were either confined to what was deemed an appropriately feminine genre or, if they were to step outside that perceived genre, were accused of “imitating” more masculine genres. See “Gillet lit le Joyce dans la Woolf: Genre in *Orlando* and *Ulysses*” in *Journal of Modern Literature*, volume 27.4 (Summer 2004), pages 27-36.

degree of repulsion and relief for not having pursued a more intimate relationship with her: “Poor girl! That’s why she’s left on the shelf and the others did a sprint. Thought something was wrong by the cut of her jib. Jilted beauty. A defect is ten times worse in a woman...Glad I didn’t know it when she was on show. Hot little devil all the same” (301).

This immediate reaction on Bloom’s part alone, a reaction that sharply contradicts Gerty’s imagined, wholehearted attraction to him, reveals a telling lack of connection. Without true physical consummation, only the false stimulation of voyeurism and masturbation, Bloom’s brief relationship with Gerty MacDowell amounts to the purely physical with little inspiration mentally or spiritually. Her perfected beauty is quickly marred by the realization of her limp, and he leaves the beach soon afterwards. In fact, as Sam Slote points out, both characters are crippled physically: Gerty with her actual limping and Bloom with his limp erection (36). This detail lends itself to suggest on a deeper, subtler level the brokenness of their connection in that Gerty’s illusion of beauty only lasts until she must rise and walk and Bloom must aid his own excitement in order for Gerty’s exhibition to affect him. In the end, Gerty is unable to elevate Bloom’s condition to that of a true artist, as there is no intimate interaction, no openness or vulnerability, and, therefore, no true comprehension of one or the other.

Thus, from the failed connection with Gerty and through the transformative experience in “Circe,” Bloom, whose ability to empathize hints at a potential ability to rejuvenate his marriage, achieves a long-sought sense of union with his own wife, Molly. As in “Nausicaa,” Joyce crafts the relationship from two points of perspective: Bloom’s in “Ithaca” and Molly’s in “Penelope.” By splitting the perspectives into their own chapters, rather than meshing them together as he did in “Nausicaa,” Joyce permits the distinction of two individuals with their own private thoughts and viewpoints. This method permits each character considerable authenticity while uniting them as a couple, for husband and wife each has his or her own narrative voice—noticeably without inclination to achieve an artificial likeness as with Gerty’s manipulation and imitation—yet both voices maintain a sense of connection, as both divulge the shared memory of Molly and Bloom’s physical union.

From Bloom’s perspective in “Ithaca,” the chief indicator of achieved empathy is the process of “antagonistic sentiments” he undergoes, knowing that Molly has had an affair: “[e]nvy, jealousy, abnegation, equanimity” (602). The progression of these emotions suggests an outward direction, outward from the self and toward the cause of said emotions. Envy starts the process

as the seed within Bloom, the pitted self that riles in faint anger, knowing Blazes Boylan has enjoyed Molly's sexual favors. The conversion from envy to jealousy, though, implies a steady shedding of that pure self-focus. This shedding leads to abnegation, the conscious decision to ignore the self-righteous anger in favor of restoring balance to the marriage, then to self-confidence by reconnecting with the other via equanimity.

Bloom's ability to undergo this emotional progression that leads to his reunion with Molly may be a direct result of his experiences in "Circe." As Gose notes, "The opportunity [to connect with Molly] comes because he can love and help another, because he has allowed his voyage to carry him to a confrontation with his own weaknesses and then to the discovery of a hidden self" (184). By confronting his own faults and weaknesses, then, Bloom is able to regard Molly and empathize with, if not wholly forgive, her dissatisfaction with their physically estranged marriage. Bloom's sense of outrage is still present at the core, yet by choosing to quell it as an explosive, detrimental reaction, Bloom converts his outrage from a destructive to a productive medium in its application, so that, of the four emotions Bloom undergoes, he develops "more abnegation than jealousy, less envy than equanimity." Bloom can then recognize Molly's infidelity with Boylan as an empty and meaningless act that, while injurious to Bloom's pride as a husband, ultimately does not usurp the love he and Molly share in marriage, the love they are able to express to each other in their sex: "From outrage (matrimony) to outrage (adultery) there arose nought but outrage (copulation)" (Joyce 603).

From Molly's purely subconscious perspective in "Penelope," the sense of empathy resounds through the string of "yesses" pervading the narrative. "Yes," as employed by Joyce in this episode, becomes the embodiment of the Blooms' reunion, the symbol of "acquiescence, self-abandonment, relaxation, the end of all resistance" (Henderson 521). The fact Molly lists a various string of lovers she has had in her youth while Bloom is lying beside her may initially appear to suggest that, with a mind seemingly thousands of miles away, she does not possess the same level of equanimity or understanding of their union. However, the rambling nature of Molly's thoughts may actually be a much more profound narrative argument concerning gender and identity, the tremendous effect of which may be witnessed at the chapter's conclusion, the one place where Molly and Bloom's reunion gains clearest definition.

In her examination of the "Penelope" episode, Alyssa J. O'Brien notes how Joyce ultimately sets Molly Bloom as a female character apart from

other characters by gifting her with a wildly vacillating subconscious narrative style that “refus[es] to capitulate to any cultural representation of gendered subjectivity” (8):

...the continually changing passages produce not simply one kind of woman, but a plethora of kinds. By creating not one, contrary yet singular Molly Bloom, but instead creating multiple Molly Blooms through textual mobility, Joyce put on paper his vision of identity as mutable, free from social constraints and conventions...The text of “Penelope” does not favor any particular representation and thus undermines the conceptualization of gender as a fixed attribute that determines social identity. (22-23)

Where Gerty MacDowell failed as a woman too bound and restricted by social appearances to inspire in Bloom an elevation of the physical, mental, and spiritual, Molly, in all her wild complexity and extreme depth of character (a depth that almost parallels Bloom’s subconscious depth in “Circe”), is able to satisfy Bloom in his need for release. More importantly, though, she is able to match him in that release, as her final resounding “Yes”—her ultimate “acquiescence” to a potential renewed relationship with him—implicates. There is no hiding of her thoughts, no censoring of the potentially shocking or shaming truth, no elevating herself to a pristine image of self-sacrificing wife or Virgin Mary. Molly is Molly, and her adherence to herself as an authentic uncontrived character in “Penelope” enables her to commit to and engage in a true fulfilling imaginative reconnection with Bloom, a reconnection that implies a ready recognition of the other and a ready willingness to accept that other, as Molly’s emphatic concluding “yesses” suggest.

One could argue that, rather than testifying to any level of empathy or artistic perception, Molly’s numerous “yesses” while considering a possible reconnection with Bloom are more a matter of pure physicality. Erwin R. Steinberg, in particular, compares Molly to the Greek-Roman figure of Gaea-Tellus, drawing from Joyce’s physical descriptions of Molly in bed when Bloom comes home, to fault Molly as a wife due to her infidelity with Blazes Boylan. Steinberg objects to seeing her as an “all-producing and all-nourishing mother, nourisher of children, receiver and nourisher of seeds, sanctuary of the dead, prophetess” (121), as she has produced few children, has maintained physical distance from her husband (resulting in a “dead” marriage), and has sought physical satisfaction from another man.

However, Steinberg’s error in his consideration of Molly is his limited scope of analysis. He has observed purely the act of infidelity and has leapt to

make assumptions about Bloom's and Molly's respective inner reflections regarding the matter. Indeed, Steinberg completely ignores any textual reference to Bloom's or Molly's thoughts at all. He narrows his analysis solely to physical description and physical action that demonstrates the animosity of Molly's infidelity, thus satisfying his argument that Molly draws a closer parallel to Pasiphaë, King Minos's wife, who has intercourse with a bull and subsequently produces the monstrous Minotaur. Therefore, Steinberg asserts, Molly cannot possibly satisfy Bloom, either by achieving a true reunion or by inspiring anything greater than physical satisfaction in their marriage.

Yet, as Michael Wainwright demonstrates in his article concerning the history of women's suffrage in Ireland, Molly demonstrates a "sexual/artistic potency"³ that reflects a keen awareness of wants and needs beyond the purely physical in her comparison of Boylan and Bloom as lovers. This awareness mirrors Bloom's own aforementioned contemplations of Molly's infidelity in "Ithaca":

Molly considers the modalities of both mind and body in contradistinction to the Dedalean image of the woman's body as a surface or 'taut vellum' for exploitation by male writers (U 3.42)... Molly's activist potential has a prospective mate in Leopold, and her awareness of Boylan's lack of conversation promotes this complementarity. Rather than Boylan, she muses, "you might as well be in bed with...a lion God Im sure hed have something better to say for himself an old Lion would" (U 18.1376-78). The lion Leo is asleep beside her...Molly's ultimate comparison between Boylan and Leopold, which lies at the crux of her monologue, leads her to conflate the 'yes' of jouissance with the acceptance of Leo as her complement. (673-74)

Boylan's "lack of conversation" implies a possible deeper interest in the company Molly seeks. As Wainwright indicates, what Molly searches and fails to discover in Boylan but finds in her marriage with Bloom is not exploitation and sheer gratification as may be assumed by her socially defined role as a woman. Rather, she seeks acceptance,⁴ a state of equality where two bodies meet and achieve an elevated status of soul through their union as complementary halves—husband and wife, man and woman.

³ Quoted in Wainwright 673. See the quote in its original context in Vincent J. Cheng's "Stephen Dedalus and the Black Panther Vampire" in *James Joyce Quarterly*, volume 24.2 (1987), page 161.

⁴ See Gose 170: As Voelker suggests, it is Bloom's "acceptance, not his knowledge, of Molly as Nature, which brings him to the state of equanimity...in 'Ithaca'" (p 44).

Their state of union potentially gains ultimate clarity through their shared recollection of the day Bloom proposed to Molly. Molly, her thoughts turning more and more toward contemplations of Bloom as the chapter and book come to a soundly joyous close, recalls the following:

the sun shines for you he said the day we were lying among the rhododendrons on Howth head in the grey tweed suit and his straw hat the day I got him to propose to me yes first I gave him the bit of seedcake out of my mouth... he said I was a flower of the mountain yes so we are flowers all a womans body yes that was one true thing he said in his life and the sun shines for you today yes that was why I liked him because I saw he understood or felt what a woman is and I knew I could always get round him and I gave him all the pleasure I could leading him on till he asked me to say yes...then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower...yes I said yes I will Yes. (Joyce 643-44)

This recollection from Molly's perspective, with deeper insight into the words exchanged and also into why the first "yes" that ultimately culminated in her matrimonial union with Bloom came forth, mirrors the recollection Bloom has of the same incident much earlier in *Ulysses*:

Hidden under wild ferns on Howth below us bay sleeping: sky. No sound. The sky...Coolsoft with ointments her hand touched me, caressed: her eyes upon me did not turn away. Ravished over her I lay, full lips full open, kissed her mouth. Yum. Softly she gave me in my mouth the seedcake warm and chewed. Mawkish pulp her mouth had mumbled sweetsour of her spittle. Joy: I ate it: joy." (144)

The differences between the two perspectives are subtly made—the absence of sound from Bloom's recollection, the rapid train of thought that runs loudly with increasing speed through Molly's head as she recalls that day—yet both ultimately share the same essence established through the same moment: the feeling of joy while partaking in the exchange of the seedcake.

This act of sharing both body and nourishment becomes deeply symbolic in the narrative of *Ulysses*, as such intimate exchanges across gender boundaries establish a potential transcendence of separation, of gendered hierarchy, through a shared experience in which two people give and receive pleasure. Bloom and Molly may not recall the experience in the same way, but the same sense of beauty and joy pervade their respective memories. While Boylan's "lovemaking" is an animalistic slapping and coming from behind, as though Molly were some beast of burden to be mounted, this

mutual image of lovemaking, with tender caresses and the gift-like exchange of food between Molly and Bloom, amounts to a greater depiction of love and unity through their free interaction as opposite genders. The love expressed in their physicality is not selfish, with one participant gaining a greater advantage from the other, thereby reflecting a form of hierarchy as with Molly and Boylan. Rather, the love created in the Blooms' marriage is symbiotic. Both participants give of themselves and receive from the other in this mutually reciprocating union, the lasting impact of which is evidenced in this shared memory that has continued to remain dear to them years into their marriage and, in these final two chapters of *Ulysses*, offers potential hope in holding them together, even despite their individual shortcomings. In this way, then, Bloom and Molly's lovemaking and exchanging of the seedcake may be viewed as evidence of a transcendent state of mind that enables them not only to overcome obstacles—such as the feelings of separation and opposition in a gender hierarchy—but also to achieve empathy with each other and true artistic perception.

The metaphor of sex is an elaborate construction that spans not only the chapters of “Nausicaa,” “Circe,” and “Penelope” but also the whole of *Ulysses* and the entirety of Joyce's written work. From *Portrait of the Artist* and Stephen's poisoned view of women as the damnable opposition to man's creative endeavors, Joyce creates a redeeming perspective of women in *Ulysses* that dissolves gender boundaries and elevates women as a natural, necessary component to man's artistic being. Through Bloom's sexual journey in *Ulysses*, Joyce offers a possible means to correct a misguided understanding of gender relations as a ruinous dichotomy through an artistic lens: to embrace difference—to explore and to celebrate contrast—in order to recognize and to experience true beauty as a union, of men and women and of body, mind, and soul. As Jean Cocteau exquisitely (and quite appropriately) concludes:

Art is born of the coitus between the masculine element and the feminine element of which we are all composed, in finer balance in the artist than in other men. The result is a sort of incest, a union of one's self with one's self, a parthenogenesis. That is what makes marriage so dangerous for artists, for whom it represents a pleonasm, a monster's attempt to approach the norm. (Qtd. in Shechner 15)

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