



The First Century of Ulysses

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Abstract:

The publication of James Joyce's *Ulysses* on 2nd February 1922 was a seminal event in literature and modernism. Determined to write the defining novel of the new century, Joyce spent seven years writing a masterwork of realism and symbolism, written in a way that no one has ever managed to replicate. Joyce famously declared that if Dublin was ever destroyed it could be reconstructed from the pages of his great novel *Ulysses*. The Dictionary of Irish Biography tells us that Joyce gave "infinitely subtle attention to the subjectivity of an insignificant Dubliner called Bloom" and by doing so "created one of the greatest figures of twentieth-century fiction, and the novel has been permanently altered by what he did."

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The First Century of Ulysses

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ABSTRACT

The onset of modernism was signalled by three critical events: the dancing of Nijinsky at the Ballet Russes, Picasso's unveiling of the disturbing *le Damselle de Avignon* and the publication of *Ulysses*.

The publication of James Joyce's *Ulysses* on 2nd February 1922 was a seminal event in literature and modernism. Determined to write the defining novel of the new century, Joyce spent seven years writing a masterwork of realism and symbolism, written in a way that no one has ever managed to replicate.

Ulysses is based on Homer's *Odyssey*, the account of the hero of Troy to be reunited with his wife Penelope and their son Telemachus. Joyce compressed the epic voyage into a mere 18 hours on a single Dublin day, the date of which we now know is 16 June 1904.



Ulysses is about one day in the lives of three Dublin characters: Stephen Dedalus, Leopold Bloom, and his wife, Marian or Molly Bloom. The two male characters cross paths during the day but have no contact until the night when Mr Bloom rescues a drunken Stephen Dedalus in a brothel and takes him home. Stephen declines the offer to stay and goes out into the night, leaving Mr Bloom to be interrogated by his wife in bed.

During the day Bloom and Dedalus experience a mundane series of events. Earthy, lascivious, passionate, Molly Bloom is Gea-Tellus, the Earth Mother, is absent until the final Penelope chapter, the ultimate stream-of-consciousness exercise, with eight long sentences.

Joyce combined great psychological insight with acute observational skills. Ulysses remains unique, perhaps the ultimate novel, an intensely human tale of universal significance.

Almost everything Joyce wrote could be considered a masterpiece, yet it is Ulysses we celebrate every Bloomsday. It provides a fictional anchor for a turbulent century in which it is all too easy to lose sight of the classical past.

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On 2nd February 1922 occurred an event that would change literary history. Its cover in the Greek colours of blue and white, a book was rushed from the printers to a Paris station to be collected by the writer on his 40th birthday. Thus was *Ulysses* unveiled to the world. James Joyce, exhausted after seven years of writing in Trieste, Pola, Rome and Zurich, knew that his book would change the world – and it certainly did.

There has never been a book like *Ulysses* and there will probably never be again. It is a unequalled combination of realism and symbolism, entwined in a way that no one has ever managed to replicate. Symbolism was the coming thing in European literature and Joyce admired the realism of Henrik Ibsen (despite telling him that he was too old to teach him anything).

The twentieth-century commencement of modernism was signalled by three critical events: the dancing of Nijinsky at the Ballet Russes, Picasso's unveiling of the disturbing *le Damoiselle de Avignon* and the publication of *Ulysses*. TS Eliot was to say of *Ulysses*: "I hold this book to be the most important expression which the present age has found; it is a book to which we are all indebted, and from which none of us can escape."

Joyce was determined to write the defining novel of the new century. *Ulysses* is based on Homer's *Odyssey*, the epic account of the 18-year wanderings of the hero of Troy to be reunited with his wife Penelope



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and their son Telemachus. While it took Odysseus ten years to get home, Joyce compressed the epic voyage into a mere 18 hours on a single Dublin day, the date of which we now know is 16 June 1904, the first day that he walked out with his future wife Nora Barnacle.

The idea for *Ulysses* went back to Dublin days. After a drunken collapse in the street Joyce was assisted up and dusted off 'in orthodox Samaritan fashion' by a Mr Hunter, a Jewish dentist reputed to have an unfaithful wife. Joyce had intended it as a story in *Dubliners*, but held it over for the novel.

Taking from Homer, Renan's life of Jesus and Hamlet (to mention but a few), his modern hero was a deracinated Hungarian Jew, a marginal figure in a city where Catholic and Protestant antagonism simmered. Leopold Bloom (his father changed his name from Virag, which means flower) sells newspaper advertising. He is cuckolded by his wife and they have not had sex for eleven years since his son Rudi died after birth. He fears their 15 year-old daughter Milly will go the way of her mother.

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We see the final appearance of Stephen Dedalus, first featured in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Adrift, the death of his mother left him bereft, he is surrounded by usurpers, has not known love and must find a father to set him free...

During the day Bloom and Dedalus experience a mundane series of events: a funeral, a newspaper office meeting, drinking in pubs, a birth, a visit to a brothel. In addition there is the rumour that Mr Bloom had inside information on the winner of a horserace (the Gold Cup), the retrieval of the body of a drowned man, Stephen's fear that he is surrounded by traitors and cannot stay at the Martello Tower, Mr Bloom's voyeuristic encounter with a young girl on a swing, the mysterious identity of the man in the raincoat and a hundred brief encounters with minor characters who fill the pages. Every character in the book was based on someone in Joyce's life.

After a cameo appearance in the morning, Molly Bloom is absent until the final *Penelope* chapter, having the stage to herself as she lies in bed. During the day, she is seldom far from Mr Bloom's thoughts and he is all too well aware that she is planning a liaison in the afternoon with Blazes Boylan, the latest in a long line of lovers.

Earthy, lascivious, passionate, Molly Bloom is Gea-Tellus, the Earth Mother. Surrounded by would-be and past lovers, she is ultimately cynical of the men she knows. Comparing them to Leopold Bloom, the memories of past encounters tumbling over her thoughts, she sees in



him the quantities she desires. In her post-coital pre-slumber reiterations, Mr Bloom slays Penelope's suitors not by violence but by a moral victory: "*well as well him as another...*"

Joyce combined two literary styles, symbolism and naturalism, using the stream-of-consciousness technique in a unique manner. The reader is both in the detached hands of the writer and the mind of the character. Thoughts tumble, twist, slide and flow. We inhabit their minds in a way that has never been done before in literature. His use of the 'stream of conscious' staggered many readers. Those of the psychoanalytic persuasion saw this as a form of Freud's free association which angered Joyce, saying that he was portraying the mystery of the conscious mind, not the unconscious.

Dublin is a city filled with characters – not least of which was Joyce's father, Simon Dedalus – but small enough to be manageable and slumbering on the margins of Europe, rather than overshadowed by grand historical events. If Dublin suddenly disappeared from the Earth Joyce declared it could be reconstructed out of *Ulysses*. Not quite, but many of the locations remain and are visited on Bloomsday, including Barney Kiernan's pub and the Sandycove Martello tower.

Nothing was left to chance in *Ulysses*; Joyce filled 12 volumes of notes for the novel. No word, sentence or paragraph is not intended. There are no coincidences: we see the ship's masts on the horizon in the early morning, the boat has docked by afternoon and the skipper encounters Stephen and Bloom in the Cabman's shelter late that night. The



contrast with Proust, whose vague reminiscences float in time, is significant.

Joyce gives one of the great literary descriptions of grief. Looking out from the Martello Tower gunrest, Stephen's thoughts drift to his dying mother who constantly comes back to haunt him from the grave, the *liliata* a background threnody:

“Pain, that was not yet the pain of love, fretted his heart. Silently, in a dream, she had come to him, her wasted body within its loose brown graveclothes giving off an odour of wax and rosewood, her breath, bent over him with mute secret words, a faint odour of wetted ashes.”

The symbolism is pervasive, multi-faceted and precisely derived. Each chapter in the book corresponds with the Homeric equivalent, albeit to a varying extent. The *Cyclops* character is the bigoted ultra-nationalistic Citizen, one-eyed in his fanaticism, who chases Mr Bloom out of the pub hurling biscuits, instead of rocks. The *Circe* episode (where men are drugged and turned into swine) takes place in Nighttown, the brothel area of Dublin.

But there is more, much more, to *Ulysses* than stunning literary feats. It is not just the thoughts and feelings of the characters but the sights, smells, sounds and music of a city. Joyce combined great psychological insight with acute observational skills. Bodily functions are described in detail. Sitting on a rock at Sandymount Beach, Stephen picks his nose while trying to parse lines of poetry. Mr Bloom reads the paper on



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the toilet and struggles to control a fart after eating a cheese sandwich with a glass of burgundy. Immersed in the warm water of a Turkish bath, he stares down at his bush, “the languid floating father of thousands.” Lying in bed, Molly Bloom starts menstruating and has to use the chamber pot. There are vivid descriptions of sex acts, reflecting Joyce’s determination to show every aspect of human life without restraint.

Joyce, an extraordinary poly-linguist, wrote each chapter in a different style. The *Oxen of the Sun* episode (Mr Bloom sits in on a drunken medical students party at the lying-in hospital while a baby is being born), starts with early Anglo-Saxon, the language following the development of English to parallel the growth of the foetus in the womb.

Circe, written in dramatic form, has a dreamy hallucinatory style to represent the lateness of the hour and Stephen’s drunken state.

The Sirens, admittedly one of the most difficult chapters to read, is an elaborate attempt to imitate musical forms with words. There are two charming siren barmaids, a blind piano tuner and much song. The elaborate musical devices resemble an orchestral overture:

“At each slow satiny heaving bosom’s wave [her heaving embon] red rose rose slowly, sank red rose. Heartbeats: her breath: breath that is life. And all the tiny fernfoils of maidenhair.”



“Bronze by gold heard ironsteel.”

Penelope is written entirely in stream-of-consciousness. To reveal Molly’s thoughts, Joyce virtually scraps punctuation, there are only eight long sentences, ending in the eternal affirmation: Yes.

“I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes.”

After *Ulysses* was published to critical acclaim, Joyce achieved fame, became a leading light in the between-wars Paris, but knew little happiness. Nora did not take kindly to her depiction as Molly Bloom, complaining that she was fat and ugly. To Joyce’s distress, she never read the book, either because it was too long or she suspected (rightly) that there were accurate depictions of their sex life.

His daughter Lucia was eventually institutionalised with schizophrenia, the relationship with Nora became more distant and his health crumbled. Joyce devoted the next 17 years to writing *Finnegans Wake*, the dream book of the night that left readers – those who could complete it – bewildered and critics dismissive. Time will tell.

Ulysses is a rich literary feast, apt to deter the beginner but mastered with some persistence and guidance beforehand. Dense, polymorphic,



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at times infuriating and littered with obscure references, *Ulysses* remains unique, perhaps the ultimate novel. While it is easy to get caught up in the stylistic pyrotechnics, it is ultimately an intensely human tale of universal significance.

Almost everything Joyce wrote could be considered a masterpiece, yet it is *Ulysses* we celebrate every Bloomsday. It provides a fictional anchor for a turbulent century in which it is all too easy to lose sight of the classical past.

On 2nd February let us the greatest literary work of the twentieth century, the author who gave it to us and the certainty that it is times that change, not humanity.

Robert M Kaplan is a forensic psychiatrist, writer and historian.

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About the Author:



Biography of Robert M Kaplan

Clinical Associate Professor Robert M Kaplan is a forensic psychiatrist, historian and writer based at the University of NSW, Western Sydney University and Wollongong University. He writes on history of psychiatry, medical history, crime, genocide and biography. He gives regular talks on these topics. His two latest books are *The King who Strangled his Psychiatrist* and *Other Dark Tales and Mary Barkas: A Life Unfulfilled* (both in press). He is currently writing about the life of the psychiatrist Helen Flanders Dunbar.