Ulysses

From Modernism Lab Essays

by Pericles Lewis

“It is a book to which we are all indebted and from which none of us can escape,” wrote T. S. Eliot of James Joyce’s Ulysses (1922). Joyce’s novel describes a day in the life of an advertising canvasser in pre-war Dublin, drawing implicit parallels between his adventures and those described in Homer’s Odyssey. Joyce began the novel in a stream-of-consciousness or “interior monologue” technique that developed naturally out of his experiments in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916). During the course of writing Ulysses, however, he largely abandoned this method and replaced it with a vast array of styles, so that the reader’s attention is directed as much to Joyce’s use of a variety of literary techniques as to the events he describes.

Ulysses demonstrates most of the notable characteristics of the modern novel. As an exploration of consciousness or the inner life, it inspired Woolf’s injunction that the novelist should “consider the ordinary mind on an ordinary day.” For Joyce this entails a preference for an anti-hero, or at any rate a hero who does not resemble the heroes of earlier novels, as well as an exploration of subject matter that, while a part of ordinary consciousness, is often taboo in art, such as defecation and masturbation. As a notable experiment in the rendering of time, Ulysses displays a modernist skepticism about the linear or sequential arrangement of events into traditional plots. In contrast with the earlier tendency to make the prose of novels generally referential, Joyce was particularly self-conscious about the literary quality or style of novelistic language he used; he experimented with narrative devices and combined the realist representation of the world with esoteric symbolism. Finally, Ulysses called attention to its own status as fiction and to relationship between fiction and history, the question of the novel as a modern form of epic.

Ulysses is set in Dublin on June 16, 1904, now celebrated by Joyce’s fans as “Bloomsday.” The day has no particular historical significance, except that it was on June 16, 1904 that Joyce had his first date with his future wife Nora Barnacle. (Joyce and Nora lived together for twenty-seven years before marrying; Joyce objected to most institutions, including that of marriage, but eventually submitted to it for the sake of his children’s legal status.) It is, in Woolf’s phrase, “an ordinary day,” although with more hours of daylight than most because of its proximity to midsummer and Dublin’s northerly latitude. Along with a seemingly endless cast of Dubliners, the novel features three major characters, Stephen Dedalus (the protagonist of Portrait), Leopold
Bloom (the advertising canvasser), and Molly Bloom (Leopold’s wife). Through the course of the novel, the attentive reader learns that Leopold and Molly have not had sexual intercourse since the death of their infant son Rudy, ten and a half years earlier. On the afternoon of June 16, Molly is expecting a visit from Blazes Boylan, who will become her lover. Bloom suspects his wife of having had many adulterous affairs, but Blazes is the only clear-cut case. According to the parallel with the Odyssey, Bloom spends the day in exile, like Odysseus on his way back from the Trojan war, before returning home at the end of the day. Where Odysseus slaughtered the suitors who had tried to seduce his faithful wife Penelope, however, Bloom meekly accepts Molly’s unfaithfulness.

The novel’s other plot-line features Stephen as a modern equivalent of Telemachus, the son of Odysseus. Like Bloom, Stephen is exiled from his home, a tower on Dublin Bay, by a usurper, his sometime friend Buck Mulligan. Stephen’s mother has recently died, so, like Hamlet, he wears black. Bloom too dresses in black, for the funeral of a friend, Paddy Dignam, who has fallen off a ladder in a drunken stupor (paralleling the death of a minor character, Elpenor, in the Odyssey). Stephen thinks of himself as Hamlet, but Joyce casts him as Telemachus, in search of a father, and the “quest for a father” became a major theme of early criticism of the novel. The novel associates Bloom with Hamlet’s father’s ghost as well as with Odysseus. Stephen’s real father, Simon, is quite incompetent, and when Bloom rescues Stephen from a brawl near the end of the novel, the two men return to Bloom’s home together. Their meeting is fairly brief, however, and it is unclear whether or not Stephen has really found the spiritual father he needs. (The encounter is loosely based on an occasion when Joyce himself was rescued from a fracas by Arthur H. Hunter, one of the models for Bloom). The novel ends, after Bloom returns to bed, with the unsurpassable interior monologue of Molly Bloom, a sort of soliloquy that gives her account of her childhood, her married life, and her other loves, as well as her views on matters such as war and music.

Joyce wrote Ulysses while living in Trieste, Zürich, and Paris, having gone into voluntary “exile” from Ireland because of its conservative social and intellectual climate. He was in close touch with avant-garde circles in all three cities, and their experiments influenced his. The novel appeared in installments in The Little Review beginning in 1918, but publication was interrupted in 1920 when its publishers were prosecuted for obscenity, over an episode in which Bloom masturbates. Once complete, the novel had to be published in Paris and was banned in England, Ireland, and the United States for over a decade. English customs officials and the U. S. Post Office seized and destroyed most copies of the first two editions. During the 1920s, the novel was known in the English-speaking world mainly through some smuggled copies. After 1930, readers could purchase Stuart Gilbert’s commentary, which contained excerpts of the novel that had not been judged obscene.
In order to make the novel easier to understand, Joyce gave his French and Italian translators schemas explaining that each “episode” had its own distinctive time, scene, style, bodily organ, art, colors, and symbol, and outlining the correspondences between characters and their counterparts in *The Odyssey* and, to a lesser extent, *Hamlet*. (The “episodes,” as the chapters are called, are known by the names Joyce gave them in his schemas, although these are not usually printed in editions of the novel itself.) There are also Biblical parallels, but they have a somewhat different status; the characters themselves are unaware of the similarities between their own lives and those of the characters in *The Odyssey*, but they frequently invoke the Bible to explain their circumstances.\[5\]

The Homeric references in *Ulysses* raise a number of critical issues. The use of parallels with one of the great classical epics to describe the humdrum and sordid marital affairs of a reasonably intelligent but not otherwise remarkable lower middle-class hero can be understood as a form of mock epic, in which high style is applied to low matter. Joyce’s attitude would then be seen as satirical, like Eliot’s attitude towards such characters as Sweeney and the typist in *The Waste Land*. More frequently, however, readers have seen Joyce as trying to represent what Baudelaire called the “heroism of modern life.”\[6\] Bloom, who appears merely comic at the beginning of the novel, seems to become more heroic, more like Odysseus, as the narrative progresses.

Another debate concerns how much weight readers should place on the schemas in which Joyce outlined the mythic parallels. Eliot praised Joyce’s “mythic method,” but many critics disagree with Eliot and see the parallels as a kind of scaffolding, not essential to the structure of the work, and interpret Joyce’s purpose as less unifying than Eliot suggests. In other words, they see Joyce not as a high modernist, but as the first postmodernist, discarding the unifying myths that Eliot wanted to maintain. The reality is complex: both Joyce and Eliot did seek myths that could make sense of contemporary history, but they both also recognized that, to be compelling, these modern myths must be complex, ironic, and multifarious. The seeds of postmodernism are present in the highest of high modernist works.\[7\][8]

For particular episodes of *Ulysses* see:

"Telemachus"

"Nestor"

"The Lotus Eaters"

"Hades"

"Aeolus"
"Lestrygonians"

"Scylla and Charybdis"

"The Wandering Rocks"

"The Sirens"

"Nausicaa"

"The Oxen of the Sun"

"Ithaca"

2. ↑ Dujardin, whom Joyce credited as the inventor of the technique, called it “monologue intérieur,” rather than stream of consciousness.
8. ↑ This page has been adapted from Pericles Lewis’s Cambridge Introduction to Modernism (Cambridge UP, 2007), pp. 153-156