

Gastronomic Symbolism In Ulysses

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ABSTRACT

In the following paper, I will explore instances where food and eating make up a major literary technique employed for the portrayal of life in Dublin in James Joyce's Magnum opus, *Ulysses*, particularly in chapter eight, *Lestrygonians*. In this context, I will discuss the three important factors that shaped Irish society — religion, imperialism and economy. The paper presents Joyce's take on these three aspects that influenced the fate of every Irish during the nation's revolutionary phase. This has been done in association with food symbolism that abounds the work. Through this paper, I have attempted to bring out the mastery of Joyce, the writer. It has also been my intention to spotlight the patriot in him — to convey, besides the literary worth of the work, that all of those images are primarily aimed at creating a cultural identity for the Irish — the Joycean way of expressing patriotism.

Keywords: *Ulysses*; food symbolism; Joycean nationalism; Irishness

INTRODUCTION

Looking at its history one gets the feeling that literature has always tried to circumvent any reference to food, or rather the process of eating. For a very long time, Western culture gave prominence to mind or intellect over body and bodily processes. The bias can be seen in Plato's teachings, which hold that the body poses a distraction to the pursuit of philosophical knowledge. Most religions, especially those with ascetic traditions, have always preached against bodily pleasures, and food, with its capacity to mobilise the senses, was to be had merely for sustenance. The process of eating was thus either underspecified or not specified at all; according to Lisa Angelella, an aversion to the concept of corporeality may be a reason for this, among others.

With the growth of rationalism, ideas got all the more powerful; Greek humanism, one of the strands of the renaissance movement, may seem different in its emphasis on human body and physical beauty. But what we find here is a godly, nearly perfect, conception of the physique — not the all-enveloping liberality of the modernist movement. In fact, the earliest humanists did not equate the term secular humanism to religious disbelief; they simply contradicted the inhuman deeds of the system. It was with Modern Secular Humanism that reason got completely liberated from religion. From then on, the concept crossed several stages, getting moulded in ways befitting the changing contexts. Regardless of this growing

adaptability, certain aspects of human life continued to remain on the fringes of the mainstream literary arena — mostly the ologies concerning the human body. However, with the emergence of literary modernism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries there was a radical departure from this trend. Modernist writers strove to reintroduce the concept of humanism in a different attire. Consequently, literature, under modernism, experienced the celebration of human sensations; topics like gastronomy, gluttony, childbirth and even defecation began to get serious attention from modernist writers. Those like Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Hemingway and Katherine Mansfield took up the latest drift not just for the sake of aesthetics but also for revelatory purposes, as in characterization. Angelella, in *Alimentary Modernism*, suggests that fundamental to the fascinating Modernist depictions of food and eating is the idea that the senses have an undeniable impact on human affairs in their own right. In fact, the human body became the crossroads where a number of perpetual modernist concerns converged: aesthetics, authenticity, culture, economy, development, commoditization, hygiene, mass production, nutrition, politics, standardisation, tradition, and the like.

With James Joyce though, this break from tradition crossed limits of conventionality with his candid depiction of scatological and sexual matters. He famously described *Ulysses* as ‘the epic of the human body’. Its publication followed a massive public outcry against the work and its creator. Ironically, even those who were themselves pioneers of change disapproved of going into the minutiae of human life as thoroughly as in *Ulysses*. D.H. Lawrence called the book “nothing but old fags..., stewed in the juice of deliberate, journalistic dirty-mindedness”. “Illiterate, underbred book...of a self-taught working man” — this is how Virginia Woolf put her dislike into words.

Reading James Joyce’s *Ulysses* is a Herculean task, both in terms of length and profundity. It is a wide window that offers its readers an intricate and enriching scene of 20thC Dublin. The novel scrutinises and remarks on a wide-ranging topics, from science and religion to beauty-products (skin food in Joycean diction) and venereal diseases. This is very comprehensive considering that the entire set of events happens within the length of a day. As T. S. Eliot puts it, *Ulysses* is “the most important expression which this present age has found; a book to which we are all indebted, and from which none of us can escape”. Joyce was not delusional when he said he wanted to create a complete man; neither was he misguided when he chose the Greek epic, *Odysseus* as the basic framework for his 20thC *Ulysses* to move about. The Greek hero is son to Laertes, husband to Penelope, father to Telemachus, lover to Calypso, companion to his co-fighters, and the king of Ithaca; in Joyce’s opinion he is also the first gentleman in Europe as well as the first inventor.

For a time, however, Joycean scholars were more enthusiastic about the universal aspects of the work, emphasising Leopold Bloom (the modernist counterpart of *Ulysses*) as the product of Joyce’s conception of the complete man; the international modernist in Joyce eclipsed the Irishness of *Ulysses*. The work gives a comprehensive picture of Ireland, covering both historical and contemporaneous aspects that a contemporary of Joyce from Ireland would have closely associated with — religion, family, politics, imperialism, nationalism, oppression, economics, language, poverty, alcoholism, hygiene, industrialization, communism, capitalism, and the list goes on. Desmond Ryan wrote of

Ulysses, “It alone would explain the Irish Revolution, for it reveals Dublin as none other than an Irishman could reveal her, an Irishman who at heart loves Dublin, and writes with all the indignation of love, the very pulse of this remorseless and brutal protest”.

In the following paper, I will explore instances where food and eating make up a major literary technique employed for the portrayal of life in Dublin, particularly in chapter eight, *Lestrygonians*. In this context, I will discuss the three important factors that shaped Irish society — religion, imperialism and economy. *Lestrygonians* corresponds to the adventures of Ulysses with the cannibals on the island of *Lestrygonians*. The greater part of the chapter consists of Bloom’s unspoken thoughts on his way to lunch, first at the Burton restaurant and later at Davy Byrne’s. As per *Ulysses Annotated*, the organ of this chapter is oesophagus while the technique used is peristalsis. The peristaltic rhythm of the chapter complements it by attaching multiple layers of meaning to the text. For instance, the digestive process, that Bloom believes to be occurring only in mortal beings, is described thus: “And we stuffing food in one hole and out behind”. This acquires a deeper meaning when read together with his reflections on childbirth: “Three hundred kicked the bucket. Other three hundred born, washing the blood off...” It seems here that Joyce (and Bloom) can’t stress enough the mundaneness of human existence — generations of humanity pushing on from cradle to grave. One could even say that, for Joyce, the mundane is all that really matters; in the part that follows, Bloom drags down the divine by reminding himself to check if the [statues of] Gods have a hole behind, next time he visits the museum. By foregrounding the idea of alimentation, Joyce offers a novel experience for his readers where gastronomic symbolism presents the ordinary in a different light.

Through his literary works Joyce sought to forge an Irish consciousness, which could throw off the twin yokes of British imperialism and Roman Catholicism. Unlike other Irish Nationalistic writers, Joyce, instead of a public display of nationalism, recognized how political liberation interlaced with questions concerning family, religion, economic independence, cultural identity and so on, questions that could never be considered in isolation from language. According to Seamus Deane, Joyce’s endeavour to construct a definite embodiment for the soul of Ireland was faced with a central paradox— “Irish experience, different from English and anxious to assert that difference to the ultimate extent, needed a new form of realisation which would have to attain this individuality while fretting in the shadow of the colonisers language”. It was the writer’s defiance that shaped much of Joycean oeuvre. This has taken some very unconventional forms, both linguistic and thematic. In the following section, I will look at how Joyce manipulates certain themes to portray the materialistic aspects of Ireland, using food symbolism.

RELIGION

Interpolation of religion and politics is apparent from the beginning of the chapter. It starts with Bloom thinking of food: “Pineapple rock, lemon Platt, butter scotch. A sugarsticky girl shovelling scoopfuls of creams for a Christian brother. Some school treat. Bad for their tummies.”

The central character is all set to start a stream of self-reflection on his way to lunch. It is the sight of the Catholic brother, who is buying sweets for his students, that sets this off.

This is one scene that reveals that Ulysses is more than meets the eye. Christianity entered Ireland by the early fifth century. It is believed that St. Patrick (known as the Apostle of Ireland), a Romano-British missionary converted the entire isle into Christianity from Irish polytheism. The apprehension and doubt that the last pagan king may have felt in welcoming St. Patrick to his territory is alluded to in the school poem that Bloom thinks about when he is, appositely, at the Burton restaurant where lunchtime is described as an uncivilised activity, sometimes even crossing the limits, to barbarism: "... swilling, wolfing gobfuls of sloppy food, their eyes bulging, wiping wetted moustaches... A man spitting back on his plate: halfmasticated gristle: no teeth to chewchewchew it. Chump chop from the grill. Bolting to get it over... Hungry man is an angry man. Working tooth and jaw. Don't! O! A bone!" In the poem, Cormac (the king of Ireland) chokes himself to death while eating. Note how the coming of Christianity runs parallel to the Pagan king's death from eating.

"Saint Patrick converted him to Christianity. Couldn't swallow it all however."

The positioning of the poem is not mere coincidence; along with its setting, the poem sets an example of how fatal the act of eating can become. Understanding Bloom's first thoughts in *Lestrygonians* in this context, it should be clear why the scoopful of cream is bad for their tummies. Bloom clearly detests the deceitfulness of the Catholic priesthood. His disagreement manifests again when he spots the impoverished Dilly Dedalus: "Underfed she looks too. Potatoes and marge, marge and potatoes."

From 6thC onwards Ireland encountered the golden age of Irish monastic scholarship that encouraged art, literature, calligraphy, Latin learning and manuscript preservation. After the first thousand years since the establishment of the Church of Ireland, it was considerably removed from its Roman counterpart. In 1155, the Roman Catholic Church commissioned the English King, Henry 2nd to invade Ireland and to reform the native Irish Church. And with the arrival of the English, superiority of the Roman church was re-established.

During the English Reformation in the 16thC, Irish Christianity faced a serious blow with the introduction of Protestantism to Ireland. 17thC saw thousands of English and Scottish protestant settlers establishing themselves in the island. Not only did this weaken the Irish church but also lowered the majority native population to the status of mere brutes. From then on, for a long period, the state of Irish Catholics remained more or less the same — on the margins. Gradually, the scene of oppression changed from being religion-specific to nationalistic. Being a nation that aspired to be free from the clutches of foreign rule, the Irish always associated Protestantism with anti-nationalism and Catholicism with the spirit of nationalism. In truth, higher representatives on the Catholic hierarchy acted directly in favour of English rule in Ireland. Further contrasting popular belief, many of the nationalist leaders like Yeats and Parnell were Protestants. For these reasons, Irish nationalists strove to unite people above their religious differences.

Bloom's reflections in *Lestrygonians* provide us a picture of how the clergy was perceived by a section of the Irish population. To Bloom, they are human parasites profiting from the poverty of those whom they represent, who are as unmindful of their people's needs as to demand their people to increase and multiply, resulting in many more underfed mouths. Joyce inverts the ecclesiastical elements in Bloom's claim that priests would collapse on the altar unless they have a reasonably heavy meal (which is a violation of the holy decree). M.

Keith Booker, in *Ulysses, Capitalism and Colonialism*, points out that for Joyce the ideologies of the British Empire and the Catholic Church did not present opposing alternatives for Ireland—they were two different but parallel forces of domination.

IMPERIALISM

Traces of influence of the English on Ireland were perceived as early as the late 12thC with the Norman invasion. Under King Henry 8th, England conquered the island completely after deposing the Fitzgerald dynasty (16thC). Even the smallest repercussion in England triggered significant changes in the Gaelic nation. For instance, it was King Henry's decision to separate the Anglican Church from Papal Supremacy that set off the ever-lasting oppression of the Irish people in the name of religion, which would end only with the Roman Catholic Relief Act of 1829.

The latter half of the opening sentence of *Lestrygonians* is an overt mockery on British imperialism: "Lozenge and comfit manufacturer to His Majesty the king. God. Save. Our. Sitting on his throne, sucking red jujubes white." The ubiquitous presence of a foreign power is strongly felt as we read through Bloom's eyes the advertising slogan displayed outside a confectionary store. It is a testimony to the servile attitude of the people towards their usurper.

On his way to Burton's Restaurant, Bloom encounters a squad of constables marching in Indian file with their foodheated faces. Bloom's musings that follow give us an ample picture of the social standing of the members of the Royal Irish Constabulary in Dublin (RIC).

"After their feed with a good load of fat soup under their belts...Let out to graze...Prepare to receive cavalry. Prepare to receive soup."

The Royal Irish Constabulary being responsible for the subjugation of anyone opposing the Imperial rule was a concrete attestation of Irish enslavement. Eighty percent of the RIC consisted of Irish catholic force and the rest was made up by the various Protestant Denominations. G.C. Duggan describes the constables thus: "Without exception they were Irish-born, their wives were Irish, at least 90 percent of them were Catholics, [...] poor gentry, spoilt priests, frustrated schoolteachers, shop assistants and sons of former policemen." The Catholics were mainly constables and the Protestants, officers. It was widely regarded as the finest police force in the world in the late 19th& early 20thC; their risky work atmosphere is evident in the words of W. D. Frederic: "Ireland was always a chink in England's armour, a condition that prevailed up to the Second World War. The Irish population was always restless and the continual warfare stimulated their dissatisfaction." Nevertheless, their social status can be inferred to have been lower down the ladder from a letter that the Chief Commissioner of the Dublin Metropolitan Police wrote to the Under Secretary in 1916: "I think the government will be faced with a serious situation unless an increase of pay is considered. The DMP rates of pay are lower than the rates obtaining in police forces of similar importance in England, while the work, during the last three years, of the Dublin police has been of an unpleasant and onerous character." Legislation was soon passed to soften the inequity giving the men only their second increase in pay in over 30 years. An Irish constable under the English government represented those who were ready to bow before the

king to earn their daily bread. Naturally, those who were against imperialism were ambivalent about them. This is reflected in Bloom's mockery of the squad of constables. He doesn't seem inclined to brand them as traitors, but takes a compassionate attitude towards their fate.

"Can't blame them after all with the job they have especially the young hornies."

ECONOMY

The majority of the people of Ireland were Catholic peasants who were very poor and politically inert. During the eighteenth century, more than 90% of Irish exports were bought by the English market. The Irish economy which largely depended on agriculture was completely dependent on England, its colonising market by the late 19th C. This, in combination with the second great famine of Ireland, destroyed the lives of the Irish people. Potato blight was exacerbated by other political factors like the indecisiveness of the Whig government, headed by Lord John Russell, in the crucial years from 1846 to 1852. Altogether, about a million people in Ireland are estimated to have died of starvation and epidemic disease during this period (nearly one-eighth of the entire population), and some two million emigrated. Open references, numerous in numbers, have been included in *Ulysses* to give us a picture of the economic state of the island. The barefoot Arab, the underfed daughter of Simon Dedalus and the scene at the Burton restaurant are all portrayals of food scarcity among Irish society.

"H. E. L. Y. S. Wisdom Hely's Y lagging behind drew a chunk of bread from under his foreboard, crammed it into his mouth and marched as he walked. Our staple food."

Above lines draw our attention to the life of those Irish who did petty jobs for daily wages. The man described here is part of a mobile advertising team. He is seen to be walking throughout the whole day, street after street for three bobs to "just keep skin and bone together"; his labour is as tiring as it is unproductive. Another instance is where the half-fed enthusiasts are seen to be stuffing up the nationalists with delectable food items; it is a reference to the common man's dining room. Joyce's cynicism towards the Irish nationalist movement is evident here. Despite their poverty, they made those, with whom lay their hope for freedom, feel at home; the nationalists, in their turn, merely gassed about [their] lovely land.

CONCLUSION

The paper presents Joyce's take on three important factors that shaped the fate of every Irish during the nation's revolutionary phase — religion, imperialism and economy, as depicted in his magnum opus, *Ulysses*. This has been done in association with food symbolism that abounds the work. Note that alimentation makes up just one of the vast array of techniques made use of, and also that it is not limited to the three aspects, but provides a wider scope for further discussion. I have attempted to bring out the mastery of Joyce, the writer. It has also been my intention to spotlight the patriot in him — to convey, besides the literary worth of the work, that all of those images are primarily aimed at creating a cultural identity for the Irish — the Joycean way of expressing patriotism.

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