

Same Old Penelope: Feminist Analysis of Molly's Soliloquy in *Ulysses*

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Similar plot structure (a hero's journey) as well as a common major theme (search for paternity), invite feminist critics to examine both Homer's *Odyssey* and Joyce's *Ulysses* to determine the effects of the prevailing male psychology on the incidental or marginal female characters. *The Odyssey*, a classical text written centuries ago, largely supports dominant patriarchal norms as evidenced by the contradicting male and female roles, gender stereotypes, and most notably Penelope's submissiveness. Centuries later, James Joyce gives us a modernist interpretation of Homer's epic, *Ulysses*, which follows Leopold Bloom, the everyday hero, on his one-day "journey" through Dublin. Like Odysseus, Bloom overcomes adversity, ultimately reclaims his patriarchal roles, both as father and husband, and returns home.

Why then does *Ulysses*, end with Molly, the twentieth century Penelope? Is Joyce making a statement about women in this male-dominated novel? Although *Ulysses* resembles *The Odyssey* both structurally and thematically, Joyce addresses contemporary issues (i.e., twentieth century), more fully develops the complexities of his protagonists, and overall portrays the human situation in very real and often unflattering detail. Yet, applying feminist discourse to the final episode, commonly dubbed Molly's soliloquy, reveals a conflict between the ostensible modern ideas of the novel and the underlying ideology they actually reinforce. Lois Tyson in *Critical Theory Today* writes that feminist criticism generally examines texts to determine how they "reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women" (81).¹ Despite her importance to *Ulysses*, particularly in the final episode, much of what Joyce reveals about Molly through her thoughts evidence her integration into the same egocentric culture central to *The Odyssey*.

Undeniably, Joyce through Molly provides a cross-section of thoughts, expressing the needs and desires of "everywoman" and supporting "new" understanding of the feminine psyche. Joyce's wife, Nora, is often considered the model for Molly. Furthermore, living in Post-World War I Paris no doubt exposed him to turn-of-the-century feminist philosophies taking shape in areas such as the

famed Left Bank.² Thus, experimenting with numerous writing methods, Joyce chose for Molly one Tyson recognizes as *écriture féminine*, a style deviating from the normal acceptable modes of writing:

“Patriarchal modes generally require prescribed, “correct” methods of organization, rationalization rules of logic [...] relying on narrow definitions of cognitive experience and discrediting many kinds of emotional and intuitive experience [...] In contrast, *écriture féminine* is fluidly organized and freely associative. Thus, it has the capacity to both reflect and create human experience beyond the control of patriarchy” (93).³

More specifically, the flow of the narrative conveys true emotional processes as they occur, not in afterthoughts as in conventional narrative. Joyce recognized that humans do not experience emotions discretely but in continuous flux as stimuli change, so he frees Molly’s thoughts through an unconventional and formless method:

“so we are all flowers a womans body yes that was the 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 how 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 and I wouldnt answer first only looked out over the sea and the sky I was thinking of so many things he didnt know of” (*Ulysses* 643).

Of course, grammatically correct punctuation creates emphasis, pauses and stops, breaking the flow of the narrative. But Joyce realizes that the mind does not always function linearly; often thoughts are random, shifting with changing stimuli. Free of punctuation, Molly’s ideas progress naturally. In a moment her mind passes through several phases of human experience—sexual desire, emotional vulnerability, and psychological empowerment—realistically, without contrivance. Joyce further challenges one to abandon conventional modes of reading and decipher the unrestrained flow of words, thereby actively involving the reader.

Daniel Schwarz in *Reading James’s “Ulysses”* recognizes Joyce’s method observing that “[Molly’s] spontaneity represents an alternative to the contrivance and artificiality of style” of previous chapters in *Ulysses* (259). Schwarz does not suggest that Joyce fails by employing multiple, conflicting styles in *Ulysses* (Joyce’s earlier “contrivance” is clearly intentional), but rather that the juxtaposition of formulaic episodes (such as “Ithaca” and “Nausicaa”) and the final chapter (apparently lacking structure) represents not only a shift in thought but

multiple shifts in psychology, emotion, and experience. While the absence of punctuation suggests that Joyce has exhausted his experimental ideas, the final chapter has a unique and significant style, reflecting one of the most central themes of the novel: the necessity of corporeal experience in concert with the intellectual process.

Joyce develops this experiential/intellectual theme by contrasting Molly to Stephen Dedalus, Joyce's modern Telemachus.⁴ Artistic and aloof, Stephen represents intellect without emotion: his denial of the Church prevents Stephen from praying at his mother's deathbed, and although his father, Simon, still lives, Stephen searches for a paternal figure throughout the novel. While not yet fully developed artistically or intellectually, Stephen behaves superior towards others in the novel. Rejecting universal human experiences such as emotion, desire and vulnerability, Stephen challenges all that Molly embraces. Unlike Stephen, Molly does not discount the physical as inferior, for the physical makes us real. Through Molly, Joyce expresses the vitality of the human body, with all its functions and forms, through Molly's physical indulgences. Schwartz writes, "I believe it is the odyssean reader's experience of Molly's *nominalistic, idiosyncratic, and eccentric* narrative that confirms the values of the novel" (268)(italics added). Schwarz characterizes Molly's thoughts as unique and personal, but also indicative of the universal thoughts, needs and desires of all women that patriarchal mores seek to diminish. By concluding Leopold's journey with Molly's "stream of consciousness," Joyce restores women's place in a society that discounts them as individuals. For Molly differs from Stephen and Leopold not only as a *woman*, but as a *person*. Removing all boundaries of sex and gender, Molly's individual design (whether sympathetic or not) distinguishes her from others. Such a statement embodies all nuances of feminist theory: before we become men and women, we are all human. Joyce recognizes that Molly must be given a unique voice, so that the reader may understand her exclusive of Stephen or Leopold or Boylan or whoever contributes to the reader's pre-text of Molly prior to the final episode.⁵

But the eighteenth episode offers more than experimental flow of words. Joyce through Molly starkly deviates from the normal patriarchal standards that coded women during the early twentieth century. Joyce undoubtedly appreciates the complexities of "modern" woman caught in a male-dominated class system. Alyssa O'Brien argues that through experimental style as well as subversive content, Joyce "navigates the polarities between feminists and conservatives" (8). Molly's thought patterns contrast those of Gerty MacDowell (the young woman Leopold objectifies in the "Nausicaa" episode), whose naive thoughts expressed in

Victorian-style prose reflect an “old-fashioned” woman. Conversely, Molly apparently resists the traditional norms of society. Throughout the episode, she makes many similar criticisms about the contradictions between a man’s world and a woman’s world. For instance, because the Catholic Church rests heavily on the patriarchal tradition, Molly must make some kind of criticism of organized religion. Schwartz agrees: “It was certainly not accidental that Joyce created a woman in Catholic Ireland whose values contradicted those of her Church” (155). Molly’s thoughts resist the strict Catholic notions concerning women and their purpose. When she muses over her confessional experiences in her youth, she wonders, why must she confess to a man (Father Corrigan) when she “already confessed it to God”? (*Ulysses* 610). Are men somehow linked to God? Can they intervene when Molly cannot? Historically, Joyce challenged religiosity, or excessive and hypocritical piety, which he exemplifies in Molly’s double oppression under strict Catholic mores, subject to both the authority of God and of men. Molly recognizes priests as ordinary men and challenges their authority over her. Why must she adhere to such strict rules? Of course, the Catholic Church criticized sexual activity beyond procreation. Therefore, women who openly enjoyed their sexuality sacrificed respect and acceptance, while men with similar sexual appetites were deemed virile. Resisting the belief that women were not meant to feel pleasure or desire from sex, Molly remonstrates: “[W]hats the idea making us like that with a big hole in the middle of us [...] nice invention they made for women for him to get all the pleasure” (*Ulysses* 611). Again, she recognizes the hypocrisy of both society and organized religion with respect to gender and sexuality.

Considering the unique fluid style and the bold content, many critics and scholars applaud Joyce for circumventing the ancient patriarchal tradition; Molly does assert universal, human ideas about women. Yet, hidden beneath the guise of the modern woman, the true Molly proves to be displaced and restricted, unable to break from an oppressive gender tradition. Susan Stanford Friedman in “Beyond Gynocriticism and Gynesis” states James Joyce’s writings “assert a kind of patriarchal privilege”; rather than stretching the boundaries of traditional literature (which reinforces the patriarchal tradition), Joyce “writes *within and at the margins* of the English language and literary tradition” (24)(italics added). This is quite a bold assertion considering Joyce’s unrivaled reputation as a post-modern experimentalist. As such, Molly is neither empowered nor revolutionary in her role in *Ulysses*. In truth, she reinforces interpolated ideology that most feminists (men and women) would resist. Consider two interpretations of Molly.

Paul Jordan Smith in characterizes Molly only in relation to her

shortcomings in the traditional feminine roles, complaining that through Leopold, one may recognize Molly's "failure as wife and mother" and "her art of presenting several sets of horns to her husband" (66). Of course, he refers to her infidelity (whether fantasized or realized), which in the novel does take place; however, he makes no mention of Leopold's indiscretions. Smith remarks on Molly's moderate success as a singer but only in contrast to her failure in the more traditional roles. Therein Smith infers that her other failures are a direct result of Molly's success outside of the accepted domestic sphere. Furthermore, he criticizes Molly's emerging voice at the close of the novel (the very quality that works against the patriarchal tradition), stating that Molly's "association of ideas is loose, extremely illogical, and highly absurd" and that she is "garrulous, ignorant and damnably annoying. The only thing in her favor is that she is never for a moment dull" (68). Smith comments, while one-sided, reveal true flaws in Joyce's depiction of Molly as feminist model.

Heather Cook Callow, a more contemporary writer than Smith (and a woman), supports that Molly's characterization in *Ulysses* is infused with inconsistencies and stereotypes. Certainly, a female critic from this time period (in contrast to Smith, a man writing during the 1920's), would recognize Molly's significance to feminist thinking; however, she admits that Molly falls short of breaking any gender barriers. First, in "Marion of the Bountiful Bosoms: Molly Bloom and the Nightmare of History" Callow admits that "*Ulysses* is a work in which women's voices are marginal" (465). Up to this point, Joyce has given a voice to each of his male characters, while restricting the women mostly to their thoughts. Worse, despite hearing very little from Molly herself, by the final episode, she has been fully characterized. Throughout the novel, she has been insulted, lusted after, criticized, and mocked, all by *male* Dubliners. Joyce, thereby, prevents the reader from truly understanding Molly because much of Molly's characterization is hearsay. There remains always an underlying criticism of her thoughts and desires as they are all linked to some moment in the novel when a man (even her own husband) has mentioned her. Furthermore, while Molly's thoughts remain unfettered in the final chapter, the "the time and positioning of her narrative have significance"; patriarchal traditions associate femininity with "night, darkness, and their companion, silence" (465). Joyce does open the channels of Molly's thoughts, but they exist only within her own conscious. She neither expresses her thoughts aloud, nor does she assert herself against the very sources of her dissatisfaction. Any resentment or anger Molly may harbor toward the inconsistencies of the male dominated world, she must keep to herself, for her thoughts flow freely only when all of Dublin is asleep, and no

one could hear her. Molly is the quintessential woman trapped in a patriarchal world. While she may not be typical, sadly, her situation in society is.

Molly, a mosaic of desires, feelings, and actions, expresses a despondency almost exclusively experienced by women trapped in the oppressive patriarchal society. Even today, post feminist backlash, women feel the effects of a society that dictates they fill a specific role, whether that be the good wife, the selfless mother, or the smoldering temptress. While these identities may be healthy as *facets* of a woman's self, they become detrimental when they singularly define a woman in society. The patriarchal tradition, that is a society dominated by the white, male class, dictates that women must fit into these roles exclusively, with little latitude to deviate. Cook Callow applies this specifically to Molly writing that "in addition to attacks for wanton sexuality, Molly's critical history is studded with demerits for deficiencies in housewifely, wifely, and mother qualities" (468). Yet, Molly does concede to the patriarchal traditions of female roles—wife, mother, sexual object; furthermore, she cannot change her situation although she bitterly resents it. Considering her courtship with Leopold, she then muses, "the greatest earthly happiness answer to a gentlemans proposal affirmatively" (*Ulysses*, 624). Molly therein glorifies the archaic notion that every woman's most rewarding, most secure choice in life is to find a husband. Feminist ideas do not view engagement or marriage as pejorative, but rather the idea that there exists no viable alternative. Notwithstanding the happiness the acceptance of a marriage proposal should provoke, Molly has misplaced its importance. Moreover, she also contradicts herself, for in the beginning of the eighteenth episode she asked, "why cant you kiss a man without going and marrying him first" (*Ulysses* 610). Throughout her forty-odd page soliloquy, Molly internally abases her husband and all men alike yet externally resigns to the belief that a woman's natural role is that of a wife and mother. And a wife typically has no life outside of her husband's: "they go and get whatever they like from anything at all with a spirit on it and were not to ask any questions but they want to know where were you where are you going" (*Ulysses* 614).

Addressing changing views of women, Tyson writes that "[they] are still bound by patriarchal gender roles in the home which they must now fulfill in addition to their career goals" (90). While this statement may seem anachronistic (Tyson's book reflects theories applicable to the end of the twentieth century), the spirit of the statement remains true even when applied to early twentieth century society. Molly desires success in a career outside of her domestic sphere. Her decision to follow the traditional route—marriage and children—stymied her

aspirations of becoming a great singer, and now that she is in her mid-thirties, much younger women of commensurate talent have usurped her place in that sphere. Her opportunity has passed seemingly, and the tone of her monologue reflects her antipathy toward those who she believes thwarted her dreams. Joyce's motives become less sympathetic, for if Molly were a break from the norm, she would not be tortured by the "guilt" of choice that pervades a woman's life.

Not discounting the difficult choices men must also make, and the pressure they also experience as a result of restrictive societal expectations, Joyce makes numerous allusions to male "hang-ups," mostly through Bloom, and sometimes through Stephen. Molly, however, most openly bears the brunt of the regret. True, Bloom mourns death (his infant son, Rudy, died eleven days after birth), getting older, and losing his youthful physique, but Molly's final soliloquy, in form, tone and content, reflects the thoughts of a woman trapped between what society expects of her and what she wants for herself. Molly recognizes this inconsistency, the idea that the right woman will be able to balance everything in the home, but she quickly contradicts her own assertions. Lamenting over the stress to get it all done, she complains "every day I get up theres some new thing [...] well when Im stretched out dead in my grave I suppose Ill have some peace"; but later she wonders why Stephen Dedalus did not stay the night so she could have brought him "breakfast in bed" (*Ulysses* 641). Her previous complaints mean nothing if she continues to subscribe to the role of the doting housewife. Although critics such as Smith see her as a failed housewife, in truth, Molly assumes a significant share of the housework; throughout the monologue, her arbitrary thoughts of ironing and washing dishes abound. She indeed notices what happens in her own home and maintains a sense of the responsibility for the upkeep. Yet, evaluating her as a "housewife" simply reinforces the patriarchal role. How has Molly failed, where Leopold seemingly has not? From a feminist perspective, Molly does not "fail" as a housewife, but rather the "housewife" archetype fails Molly.

Molly also applies negative stereotypes that reinforce the restrictive patriarchal "good girl/bad girl" dichotomy.⁶ Linked to the idea that women simply fulfill roles in society, patriarchal tradition identifies a woman's sexuality, ambitions, and demeanor within one of two finite categories: the good girl and the bad girl. The "good girl," submissive and self-effacing, does not indulge herself in desire or ambition. Naturally, a "bad girl" is her polar opposite (as though women are made from only two molds); presumably lacking character or moral fiber, she exercises no restraint and takes delight in others' miseries. Traditionally, this harmful binary creates standards to which no one can reasonably adhere. Once a woman has deviated ever so slightly from the "good girl" status, her only other

option is the “bad girl” persona, thereby discrediting her in the eyes of patriarchal society and rendering her unworthy of respect. The dominant sex and/or class may then effectively invalidate those without to sustain security and power. Such restrictive classifications further deny women inherent human desires and ambitions. Molly suffers from this oppression as she clearly resigns to the image.

However, in her monologue, Molly seems comfortable making generalizations and stereotypes in her monologue. Molly displaces her feelings of inferiority and dismisses Mrs. Riordan as boring and uptight simply because Mrs. Riordan restrains her desires rather than indulges them and talks about intellectual matters that Molly does not understand. Immediately separating herself from Mrs. Riordan, Molly remarks “shes as much a nun as Im not” (*Ulysses* 610). Her comment is problematic for a number of reasons. Clearly, Molly resents Mrs. Riordan, who, again, represents an educated population with which Molly shares no commonality. She, therefore, discounts Mrs. Riordan’s restraint and intellectuality *as a substitute for*, not a complement to her sexuality: “I suppose she was pious because no man would look at her twice I hope Ill never be like her” (*Ulysses* 610). From a feminist perspective, the underlying message is two-fold. First, Molly distinguishes herself from Mrs. Riordan by patriarchal values which dictate that piety equals lack of sexuality or freedom. Second, Molly reinforces the dominance of men as the final judge of character in society by claiming that because she is unattractive to men, Mrs. Riordan’s life is in some way unfulfilling and lackluster. Without a second thought, Molly seems to believe that a woman should make herself a sexual object. A number of times she talks about provocative clothing and gestures meant to elicit male attention: “I had that white blouse on open in the front to encourage him” (*Ulysses* 625). In fact, she concedes “thats what a woman is supposed to be there for or He wouldnt have made us so attractive to men” (*Ulysses* 625). Feminists would attribute such a statement to *biological essentialism*, the idea that men and women are biologically predisposed to a particular status or role in society; Molly’s concession that she be a sexual object to men simply because she is attractive to them demonstrates the “patriarchal privilege” discussed by Susan Stanford Friedman.

While she indulges in physical experiences, Molly seeks no connections beyond the physical realm; as a result, her relationships remain superficial. Though surrounded by all of Dublin, Molly is truly alone. The “Penelope” episode “reveals that Molly has been lonely most of her life”: she “seems to have no female friends,” and “[h]er male companions are mostly memories” (Cook-Callow 471). Believing that either a man lets you down “or its some woman ready to stick her knife into you,” she reinforces male-dominated thinking: “no wonder [men] treat

us the way they do we are dreadful lot of bitches” (*Ulysses* 640). Her relationship with her husband since the death of their son, Rudy, has systematically broken down. More importantly, Molly has no female companionship, no sisterhood, no “psychological [...] bonding among women based on the recognition of common experiences and goals” (Tyson 96). Joyce isolates her not only from the comforts of a familial bond (with Leopold and her daughter, Milly), but also from any potentially cathartic female bond. As the tone of her monologue evidences, Molly views all women with either disdain or jealousy; such a tradition, which oppresses women by separating them, has so infiltrated Molly’s ideas about other women (for example, her view of Mrs. Riordan) that she cannot recognize her own dependency on men. Because she shares the “good girl/bad girl” view, she rejects women such as Mrs. Riordan who seem to be “good girls.” Molly perceives her only alternative to be “whore” or “monster” and to characterize women as “petty, vain, and jealous” (Tyson 88). In other words, women are depicted as in constant competition, and most fiercely so when fighting over a man. Even her relationship with Milly, typical of mother-daughter rivalries, strains the parameters of her patience.

A final misconception of Joyce’s subversion of patriarchal stereotypes lies in Molly’s “healthy” sexual appetite. She is guided not by her personal desires but rather by the need to be desired by others; therefore, she subscribes to archaic notions of romance and fulfillment. A cursory reading of *Ulysses* may define Molly as the liberated feminist freely addressing her own personal needs, but upon closer inspection, Molly focuses on the need to be desired by her husband, her lovers. Patriarchy defines femininity by the ability to titillate, to evoke desire, and Molly subscribes to this definition. Thinking back on her day’s affair with Blazes Boylan, Molly criticizes his aggressive, inconsiderate lovemaking, not because he has degraded her, but because he failed to notice her many hours of preparation. Finally dismissing him from her thoughts, Molly turns to romantic wishes; despite her age and experience, she still wishes that “some man would or other would take [her] sometime when hes there and kiss [her] in his arms” (*Ulysses* 610). A modern “damsel in distress,” she waits for Prince Charming to find her and “awaken” her desire. But Molly cannot conceive being alone or undesired. Absent the prince, she must settle for a diluted version of the fairytale: “to be in love or loved by *somebody* if the fellow you want isn’t there” (*Ulysses* 639)(italics provided). Ultimately, Molly realizes neither version of the fantasy; she indulges in an empty sexual affair with Boylan. Such attempts at fulfillment through her bodily desire lead only to Molly’s disappointment, for Boylan lacks charm or tenderness. And, Molly’s acceptance of her own disappointment reveals her

incomprehension of the oppressive standards by which she lives. Furthermore, rather than break the fantasy and disappointment cycle, Molly reverts to remembering the day Leopold proposed to her,

"...I was a Flower of the mountain yes when I put the rose in my hair like the Andalusian girls used or shall I wear a red yes and how he kissed me under the Moorish wall and I thought well as well him as another and 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 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" (*Ulysses* 644).

This passage, while exhibiting real and intersecting emotions, also exemplifies Molly's need to be desired. She already equates the acceptance of a marriage proposal, in spite of her true desires, with womanhood and femininity. Her affinity for the word "yes" further reinforces the fairytale submissive of the girl in need of rescuing.

But, feminists would ask, what can women do in light of Molly's acquiescence? How shall we categorize her, as a feminist or doormat? Sexual object or sex goddess? The answer is simply that we do not categorize her at all, for feminists want to nullify categorization. We simply do not categorize her at all, for that very action places unnecessary restrictions. Why must we place her, or anyone, on pedestal or on the examining table? Perhaps it is our nature to criticize, but when we do, we are often unhappy with the results. As traditional patriarchal thinking shows, unreasonable expectations harm us all. Criticism should rather free us from placing restrictions, and help us recognize the universal. In the end, love her or hate her, Molly with all her inconsistencies and contradictions can make us recognize the areas which need scrutiny and reflection in our own lives. In that, Joyce, no matter his motives, has done his job.

Notes

Thank you to Villanova University and *Concept*; to Dr. James Murphy for your introduction to *Ulysses*; to Ellen Massey for your time and effort; and to Dr. Klaus Volpert for your support.

¹ Tyson further acknowledges the multiple issues that feminist critics apply to texts, and, as such, makes reference to the alternative category of "feminisms" rather than one "feminist" perspective.

² In 1902, Joyce first lived one year in Paris, returning in 1920 to spend almost twenty years as an expatriate. Well-acquainted with Sylvia Beach (who first published *Ulysses* through the well-known Shakespeare & Co.) and contemporary with writers such as Gertrude Stein, also living in Paris, Joyce enjoyed exposure to the important

“Parisian Modern Movement.”

³ According to Tyson, French feminists, who have historically focused on the “philosophical dimension of women’s issues,” have asserted that people maintain a “pre-verbal connection” with their mothers that manifests itself through this form of writing. Tyson recognizes this style in Joyce’s writing; however, she does not assert that Joyce himself would have categorized “Molly’s Soliloquy” as such.

⁴ Stephen Dedalus first appears as the central character in *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce’s largely autobiographical novel, which he wrote before *Ulysses*. *Portrait* follows Stephen from age three to early adulthood; therefore, *Ulysses* begins approximately two years after *Portrait* ends. Stephen has returned to Dublin where he teaches history at a boy’s school. Two central issues haunt Stephen: his struggle to fully realize his artistic identity and his search for a replacement for his overly critical, harsh father, Simon Dedalus.

⁵ The previous seventeen chapters yield many conflicting characterizations of Molly, most of which are negative and few of which originate from Molly herself.

⁶ For more on this particular aspect of feminist theory, see Tyson’s *Critical Theory Today*, pp. 83-89.

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