



## The Odyssey of Man: Masculinity in *Ulysses*

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In 2011, the critic Margot Norris launched a new excavation of an often-neglected character, offering Joyceans promise of new answers nearly a century on from the publication of *Ulysses*.<sup>1</sup> It is an enterprise that she begins but does not finish. Her impassioned and sympathetic defence of the minor villain Hugh. E. Boylan carves out several layers of inquiry, including Boylan's status of masculinity in relation to Dublin's many men.<sup>2</sup> In this essay, I wish to take up this very topic of masculinity. In particular, I will analyse Joyce's sexual dynamic of masculinity in its form of the 'singular' ideal. Questions of politics and masculinity in the 19th and 20th centuries intersect, as I shall pay close attention to the novel's treatment of adultery, power and the role of language itself in crafting infamous affairs. By examining Boylan's characterisation, this essay will argue that Joyce constructs a singular image of masculinity in order to draw attention to its limitedness. As we shall see, the result is an attempt by Joyce to destabilise the binaries of gender itself.

To construct the figure of Boylan, Joyce offers us essentially the same collection of recycled images. The narrator allows us to see him largely through his body and his clothes. These two aspects are indistinguishable. For the most part, our sensory experience of Boylan is drawn from his 'skyblue tie... a widebrimmed straw hat... a suit of indigo serge'.<sup>3</sup> These items return several times. Notice how exact, yet meagre, Joyce's descriptions are. We are never allowed to view him from head to toe in any substantial detail. His body, too, is captured with a kind of tunnel vision: 'his hands in his jacket pockets [...] his eyes [...] the red flower between his lips'.<sup>4</sup> The narrator is self-conscious of these descriptions. 'Blazes Boylan's smart tan shoes creaked on the barfloor, said before'.<sup>5</sup> It is a deliberate and blatant process of selection, omission and replication, as the descriptions of Boylan remain constant throughout many of the episodes. There is the sense that by curating this character's presence in the text, he is unable to change or be changed – he is a fixed object, indeed.<sup>6</sup>

The unchanging nature of Boylan's character can be appreciated in conjunction with Joyce's musical sensibility. Norris writes of Boylan: 'Music is, therefore, a fitting medium in which to present him, given its function to convey the aural—that is, the external, superficial, and superficially aesthetic—aspect of language, rather than its meaning'.<sup>7</sup> For Norris the descriptors 'jingling' and 'jauntily' serve as his musical leitmotifs, stereotypically conveying both his present temperament and the energy that he brings into a scene. In addition, I would suggest that these musical leitmotifs enact the narrative method by which Boylan is brought to the page. 'External', 'superficial' and 'aesthetic' certainly describe this method. He is contained within the same few words. Musical repetition works as a rhetorical force, rendering the subject familiar, mnemonic and memorable. Captured in leitmotif and Joycean play on words and sounds, the effect of Boylan's immutability is significant: confining Boylan to flat, stable and unchanging characteristics substantially strengthens the values that Boylan robustly upholds. He is more motif than character, and it is here that we may use Boylan to tap into questions of gender and masculinity in *Ulysses*.

The sparsely characterised Boylan is significant not only for who he is, but for what he represents. The objectification of this character, the obsessive reminders of his exterior features, is combined with a series of conventionally masculine traits. Boylan behaves 'gallantly' and 'roguishly'.<sup>8</sup> As he 'offered to the three ladies the bold admiration of his eyes' we are referred to recognisable literary genres dating back as early as European chivalric romance.<sup>9</sup> In *Ulysses* he is clearly the essence of conventional, almost archaic masculinity. The lack of detail in describing Boylan, as discussed earlier, leaves him successfully depicted as a singular embodiment of man – one who may achieve all the desires of Dublin's men.

<sup>1</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1922] 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Margot Norris, 'Don't Call Him "Blazes": Hugh. E. Boylan's Narrative Caricature', *James Joyce Quarterly*, 48.2 (2011), 229-249.

<sup>3</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 243.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265.

<sup>6</sup> Consider Forster's assessment of 'flat' and 'round' characters. E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (London: Penguin Books, 1980).

<sup>7</sup> Norris, 'Don't Call Him "Blazes"', p. 236.

<sup>8</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 219.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

Boylan's convincing embodiment of conventional masculinity is based largely on the sexual aspect of his character. To go even further, his masculinity – his status of 'man' in its purest singularity – is necessarily defined, above all else, by its sexual drives. Consider the single moment of interiority that Joyce grants him: 'Blazes Boylan looked into the cut of her blouse. A young pullet'.<sup>10</sup> Much has been made of this disclosure.<sup>11</sup> The general consensus is that the three words are an affirmation of his masculine sexuality. I do not question, either, the brief and efficient use of 'a young pullet' to capture Boylan's sexual drives. I find more interesting that it is language and form that define Boylan's masculine sexuality. He perceives the blonde girl at Thornton's by way of metaphor: a pullet, or, a young hen. In this brief interior monologue, we make sense of his predatory sexuality only in Joyce's oblique use of language to convey desire. In *Ulysses* as a whole, and not simply limited to Boylan, the expression of sexuality is openly reliant upon and determined by language itself.

If the stability of Boylan's celebrated masculinity in general rests on the economic use of limited masculine signifiers – associated with established literary conventions of heroism such as 'gallantly' and 'bold' – then Boylan's illicit sexuality must be protected by the indeterminacy of language.<sup>12</sup> Molly's affair with Boylan is expressed in many creative ways. Jokes and puns include, 'What is home without Plumtree's potted meat? Incomplete. What a stupid ad!'<sup>13</sup> The episode 'Sirens' uses the aural aspect of language, its playfulness, to undercut Bloom's seriousness with comedy and mockery pointed at the cuckold: 'one tapped with a knock, did he knock Paul de Kock, with a loud proud knocker, with a cock carracarracarra cock. Cockcock'.<sup>14</sup> Like Bloom's Henry Flower, pseudonyms and alter egos conceal Boylan's sexual affairs. At least until 'Circe', Bloom confronts Molly's transgressions by burying the real affair under a textual one – '*Sweets of Sin*'. 'Warmth showered gently over him, cowing his flesh. Flesh yielded amid rumpled clothes. Whites of eyes swooning up. His nostrils arched themselves for prey. Melting breast ointments (for him! For Raoul!).<sup>15</sup> For our reading experience, the erotic language of the *Sweets of Sin* passage and the language of Bloom's arousal in *Ulysses* itself become blurred. Raoul replaces Boylan. The latter's behaviour so clearly resembles that of the brazen adulterers in the novels that Molly reads – thus, Boylan as a character is developed in other ways, by elements that have no explicit connection to him. His identity, constituted by masculine sexuality, and already sparsely characterised to remain robust and unchangeable, is firmly protected by language.

Molly's affair with Boylan is not only celebrated by this playful expressiveness of language, but also by its features of omission, emptiness and censorship. News of the affair is communicated between characters by ellipses and the aural motif of 'O'. The sound pervades Boylan's first intrusion in the home: 'Who was the letter from? he asked. Bold hand. Marion. – O, Boylan, she said'.<sup>16</sup> Joyce has already shown the reader through his narrative form that endless and undeclared thoughts, fears, surprises and hesitations can reside in the smallest gaps between spoken words. The 'O' in 'O, Boylan' begins a secret language. M'Coy and Nosey Flynn – hear the irony of their names, 'coy' and 'nosy' – are privy to the implicit knowledge of what debaucheries might occur on Molly's tour. 'That so? M'Coy said. [...] Who's getting it up? [...] O well, he said. That's good news'.<sup>17</sup> Nosey Flynn twists the knife: 'O, that's the style. Who's getting it up?'<sup>18</sup> There is both a celebration and a concealment of the affair occurring simultaneously.

The novel's linguistic celebration of the affair, its lewd playfulness of language to torment Bloom, is validated by Boylan's unshakeable status in Joyce's Dublin society. Boylan's sexuality is a spectacle. The tanned shoes that signify Boylan are synecdochic for broader concepts of masculinity in general and masculine sexuality in particular, alongside an element of the dandy about them too. As his shoes move from one scene to another, Boylan garners admiration from fellow Dubliners. Women are infatuated: '[Miss Kennedy] smiled on him. But sister bronze outsmiled her, preening for

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 219.

<sup>11</sup> Saint-Amour describes the thought as 'predatory'. To highlight the voracity of the gesture, Osteen links the carnation between Boylan's teeth to the Latin *carnis*, or 'flesh'. See Paul, K. Saint-Amour, 'Over Assemblage: *Ulysses* and the *Boîte-en-Valise* from Above' in *Cultural Studies of James Joyce*, ed. by R. B. Kershner (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), p. 44. See also Mark Osteen, 'Female Property: Women and Gift Exchange in *Ulysses* in *Gender in Joyce*, ed. by J. W. Wawrzycka and M. G. Corcoran (Florida: Florida University Press, 1997), p. 34.

<sup>12</sup> See notes 5 and 6.

<sup>13</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 163.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 271. Sirens. John S. Rickard finds an element of betrayal and guilt in 'cock', besides its obvious sexual connotations. He cites Peter's betrayal of Christ – 'the cock crew' – as well as Horatio's description of the disappearance of King Hamlet's ghost. See John S. Rickard *Joyce's Book of Memory: The Mnemotechnic of Ulysses* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 147.

<sup>15</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 227.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

him her richer hair, a bosom and a rose'.<sup>19</sup> Martin Cunningham, Mr Power and Simon Dedalus, too, do not hide their enthusiasm to greet him from the carriage in 'Hades'.<sup>20</sup> These characters react with such reverence to a character who exists in our experience merely as a limited collection of material objects, a pair of tanned shoes or a straw hat. Boylan is exalted to the status of a genuine hero, a 'conquering hero', and we are invited to embrace him despite how little we know about him.<sup>21</sup> The passive and unfulfilled Lenehan from the *Dubliners* story 'Two Gallants' finds an object of vicarious pleasure in the heroic Boylan. The image of Lenehan tugging at Boylan's elbow sleeve at the Ormond Hotel mirrors Yeats's attack 'On those that hated 'The Playboy of the Western World', 1907'.<sup>22</sup> The sexually dysfunctional crowd of 'Eunuchs' gaze upon the spectacle of 'great Juan riding by' with jealousy at his 'sinewy thigh'. If they allow themselves to feel any pleasure, it would be vicariously felt at most. Joyce's *Dubliners* seem to be slowly and cautiously climbing out of a sexual repression in Ireland.

The novel's anxious oscillation between the concealment of the affair underneath language, and the celebration of it, reveals attitudes towards a precise moment in Irish politics that cannot be ignored in our study of masculinity. For Joyce's *Dubliners*, the return of Odysseus to Ithaca would manifest itself as the return of Charles Stewart Parnell. The story of Parnell's scandal with Katharine O'Shea is attached in Irish cultural consciousness to the downfall of a great hero. In Joyce's writings, as early as the Dedalus family's Christmas dinner in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), debate over the scandal and the Catholic Church's reaction become complex and polarising. Joyce depicts passionate, wild and violent men who are desperate for salvation and the arrival of a hero whom they believe they deserve, Parnell or otherwise: 'I'll wring the neck of any fucking bastard says a word against my bleeding fucking king'.<sup>23</sup> Considering the dangerously polarising effect of the Parnell debate in Ireland, Boylan is the sole recipient of unanimous acceptance and affection in Dublin. The question is not purely political, but bound up in heroism – masculine heroism – as an ideal.

Private Carr's aggression and Lenehan's pathetic fawning serve to demonstrate a hysteria of inferiority and pride. They are images constructed for satire, and their antidote is the caricatured hero Boylan. The 'O' language of censorship protects Boylan the way Parnell was never successfully protected. At the same time, Boylan's widespread popularity in the novel points to a hypocrisy: there are men in *Ulysses* that embrace Boylan as a heroic figure whilst knowing, or, at least, suspecting, that he is having an affair. We begin to see why the language of *Ulysses* contradicts itself in both concealing the affair and making light of it through language. Boylan is characterised as a kind of hero who verges on the parodic: Joyce brings out the hypocrisy of Boylan's all-too-easy reception in Irish society, exaggerating those unapologetic sexual behaviours.

So far we have been developing an understanding of Boylan as a successful and well-received hero of Ireland. His masculinity is robust and convincing. The success of his unchallenged and unpunished affair with Molly may be interpreted as compensation for Ireland's failure to save Parnell. However, as we move away from abstract terms such as 'masculine' and 'hero', and look further into a comparison of specific details between the real Parnell and the fictional Boylan, we face some problems – not least because of the latter's sparse characterisation. Though Boylan enjoys the public adoration reserved for Parnell, he is not Parnell. Joyce distances the two in some very precise ways. Boylan is a dandy defined almost exclusively by his fine clothes, while Parnell was known to be a dour man. Boylan is physically robust, as we learn from Molly, while Parnell suffered from ill health. Characterised by inversion, Boylan panders to the kind of Dublin that believes it deserves him. If he is a hero, the reincarnation of Parnell, he is a hero who can only reappear as a parody of the past – a Parnell of the mind.

This undetermined plurality of the masculine hero problematises our image of Boylan as the singular embodiment of masculinity. His inverted characterisation against Parnell reveals, also, his limitedness. He is only one kind of man, and the novel offers other kinds. His dandy qualities and music career, for instance, are not traditionally masculine traits. He has no ties to the political, military or Gaelic sports history of Ireland that Joyce explores in episodes such as 'Cyclops'. These suggest that Boylan's masculinity is not necessarily an Irish one, but, of a more cosmopolitan variety. After all, Plumtree's Potted Meat is an English product. The unwitting absorption of English traits which are

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 254.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89. For Bloom to smear this hero as 'Worst man in Dublin' damages his position more than it does Boylan's. Bloom inspecting his nails in the carriage is an apathetic and selfish gesture during a moment of public appreciation for a man in the public light.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 254.

<sup>22</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Responsibilities' and Other Poems* (Montana: Kessinger Publishing, [1914] 2004).

<sup>23</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 554.

then reclassified as Irish is indeed concerning. Boylan's gendered heroism has little to say about Irish nationalism and other revivalist matters of the state. His *version* of masculinity is a very individual, private and singular one.

The stability of what we have so far described as Boylan's 'conventional masculinity' comes to its most subverted state when we begin to track the journeys and evolutions of Boylan alongside another male figure, Leopold Bloom. Whilst Boylan is sparsely characterised, Joyce bombards us through the interior monologue with more information about Bloom than we can comprehend. The method of characterisation used to create the two men could not be more different. Let us replace Parnell with Bloom and measure how Bloom's masculinity informs us about Boylan's. By comparing the two men, Bloom and Boylan, I do not mean to set up a binary of masculinity. Rather, note how similar the two men are. At Dlugacz's shop, Bloom voyeuristically gazes at 'the nextdoor girl at the counter [...] His eyes rested on her vigorous hips'.<sup>24</sup> He fantasises about a stylishly dressed woman at the Grosvenor: 'possess her once take the starch out of her'.<sup>25</sup> Bloom's interior treatment of Gerty MacDowell in 'Nausicaa' reveals him to be equally as much the stereotypical boorish and lascivious man.

From this point onwards, however, Bloom and Boylan diverge in their characterisations. Bloom undergoes a veritable odyssey of masculinity through the myriad ideas of what it means to be a 'man'. His discovery aligns with his changing attitudes throughout the day towards his wife's affair. Consider Richard Hamilton's artwork, 'The Transmogrifications of Bloom' and its Cubist suggestions of transformation, movement and fluidity within the self.<sup>26</sup> Bloom can play the part of the boorish man, but his gender can also deviate from the conventional and stereotypical. Bloom's 'effeminate' qualities of empathy and compassion, such as his caring remembrance of Mina Purefoy in 'The Oxen of the Sun', are wildly exaggerated in the macabre psychodrama 'Circe', where he undergoes a temporary sex inversion and becomes pregnant. 'Bella' becomes 'Bello' as gender itself is revealed to be a performance of textuality.

Whilst Bloom is inverted in 'Circe', driven by the plenitude of his genders – masculine, feminine and all that is in between – Boylan's spare character is merely exaggerated and flattened further. 'You can apply your eye to the keyhole and play with yourself while I just go through her a few times'.<sup>27</sup> Bloom's guilt adds layers to his character, whereas Boylan's unapologetic nature seems to have been left unaffected by the wave of psychological growth that the 'Circe' episode brings to a character. Boylan's limitedness and sparse characterisation, as outlined earlier, show their weaknesses in this episode.

Boylan's masculinity is further undermined in the episodes that follow 'Circe', as we edge ever closer to the woman who determines Boylan's confidence and status as a sexually successful man. In the last three episodes, Boylan's masculinity as an object of power is systematically destabilised. In 'Eumaeus' Bloom plots to usurp Boylan by introducing the musically-minded Stephen to Molly. Stephen, who shares some, but by no means all, qualities with Boylan is proposed as a solution to the Bloom-Boylan binary. In 'Ithaca' the number of men to have known Molly multiplies: 'What preceding series? Assuming Mulvey to be the first term of his series [...] Hugh E. (Blazes) Boylan and so each and so on to no last term'.<sup>28</sup> Placing Boylan at the end of a list with no end is, in fact, a consolation for Bloom. The singularity that Boylan embodies suddenly appears meagre compared to the many other iterations of 'man' that Dublin produces to win over Molly Bloom.

In 'Penelope', it is Molly herself who delivers the final blow in dismantling Boylan's quickly fading image. Her satisfaction is mixed with annoyance at his rudeness. Her unclear repetition of the 'he' pronoun blurs the identities of Boylan and Bloom, questioning their oppositions. When she wonders if 'he' is thinking of her in his sleep, we can be confident that she is referring to Boylan, as she knows that Bloom will already be thinking of her, unquestionable in his love. In the chaotic monologue of 'Penelope', Bloom becomes more stable as a character and appears to leave a defined impression on Molly's mind. Her memory of Boylan, however, is thrown into indeterminacy. Though her monologue is graphically detailed (indeed, she appropriates the previous censorship of the affair, the 'O', and wildly exposes it in all its sensory quality), she still contradicts herself on the number of times that he made her climax. This is one of the episode's many carefully constructed contradictions designed by Joyce. Whether he was exceptional, merely adequate or too coarse, Molly does not arrive at a categorical judgement of Boylan's performance. It is not that the text denies Boylan's success as a man, but the waves of formal and psychological experimentation introduce plurality and

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Hamilton, *The Transmogrifications of Bloom* (London: DACS, [1984-5] 2007).

<sup>27</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 527.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 683.

indeterminacy against which Boylan's stable image of 'conventional masculinity' seems only artificial and hollow. By contrast, Bloom's triumphant, peculiar and self-effacing kiss on Molly's bottom is a gesture of powerlessness and submission, purposefully relinquishing the power of the man in the home. It surprises his wife – and us – in a way that Boylan could never do.

Hugh. E. Boylan is only one kind of man, rather than the singular essence of masculinity. Decentering him allows Joyce to offer alternative versions of manhood. Boylan may be a character of masculinity in its singularity, but he fails to represent all the many versions of manhood in *Ulysses*. Joyce pluralises masculinity. This awareness, in effect, calls into question the stable binary of gender itself. As the form of *Ulysses* changes from episode to episode, Boylan's rigidity of character and gender cannot keep up with the later experimentations. Bloom's ultimate success over Boylan is ironic: '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'.<sup>29</sup> Molly chooses Bloom over Boylan because she identifies and embraces the parts of her husband that do not belong in a conventionally masculine hero. The androgynous streak is present in both of the Blooms.<sup>30</sup> Their flexibility of gender allows them to be fluid and unresisting, reshuffling power and reshaping themselves to face catastrophes of the political, the domestic and the formal.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 731.

<sup>30</sup> The androgyny of women in literature has been explored in many writings, not only in critical studies of Molly Bloom. Consider also the works of Virginia Woolf.

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