
**Sexualizing Motherhood: Restoration of Women's Agency in James Joyce's
*Ulysses***

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Abstract

This article investigates the paradoxical portrayal of motherhood and female agency in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. While the novel is groundbreaking in its psychological depth, its female characters are often filtered through a reductive, male gaze that equates them primarily with their biological functions. The rationale for this research stems from the need to critically examine how even modernist, avant-garde literature can perpetuate patriarchal norms by sexualizing motherhood and depriving women of individual subjectivity. This study contends that through a close analysis of various episodes, the narrative largely frames its mothers as a mere medium for procreation, their sanctity depreciated by the sexualized perceptions of male characters. The scope of the work is to juxtapose these limited portrayals against the singular exception of Molly Bloom. Her soliloquy in the 'Penelope' episode is evaluated as a crucial subversion of this pattern, granting her an autonomous voice to express desire and complexity, thus challenging the very reductive frameworks the novel elsewhere establishes.

Keywords: James Joyce, *Ulysses*, motherhood, agency, modernism.**Introduction:**

Throughout history, preconceived notions of gender have restricted women to the particular roles prescribed for them. The Victorian notion of "the Angel in the House" required the woman to be a meek, submissive, and self-sacrificing entity, entitled to lead a pre-defined domestic life. This convention is reflected in what, years later, the American feminist Betty Friedan called "the feminine mystique"- the assumption that women would be content in their homes as wives and mothers. Research, however, suggests that this social attitude was not merely a result of patriarchal authority but a gradual split that happened within the households. When the wars hit Europe, women faced the additional burden of rebuilding broken families. As men fought and died in war, women and the home sphere emerged as a relatively stable domain. As the children found refuge in maternal affection, the fathers became distant, less involved members of the family.

In his brief article, Bruce Williams observes that women have received two different treatments in European literature - as more virginal and virtuous than men in one method associated with France and Western Europe, while more primitive, sexual, and less civilised in another associated with Eastern Europe and Russia. Neither approach views women as complete human beings (Williams 545). It is thus essential for understanding how Joyce's female characters are subjected to reductive treatments within a single, modern Irish context.

Usurpation of the Female Reproductive Power

In her article titled 'Textual Mater: Writing the Mother in Joyce', Ellen Carol Jones discusses the obliteration of the mother's involucrum by the male. This obliteration is double- one in the literary context, where, according to Jones, "the male production of logos usurps the reproductive power of the mother", and the other is in the physical context where the "female genitalia is penetrated and torn" (Jones 257-258). The sense of depriving mothers of their agency is reiterated in the 'Oxen of the Sun' episode, where the narrator explicitly eulogises Theodore Purefoy for his "achievement" and appreciates his "good fight", echoing Jones's concept of double obliteration. Moreover, Joseph A. Boone interprets the complex narrative style imposed on Mina Purefoy's labour as a misogynistic attention-seeking demonstration of authorial prowess (Boone 202).

Another viewpoint that a number of critics concur on is that paternal insecurity is the cause of the mock appropriation of wombs and pregnancy. Fear that mothers are unique because they have a physical bond with their children, while fathers have a more ambiguous relationship with them. This is evident in the case of Stephen, who believes that "*amor matris* may be the only true thing in life" and "paternity might be a legal fiction" (Joyce 170), and hence his wandering for a father figure and not a mother figure whom he has actually lost. Nevertheless, the concern that needs to be addressed is whether Joyce is restoring women's lost maternal agency or is he obscuring his stance.

Commodifying the Feminine

Though critics have read Joyce's treatment of women in both positive and negative ways, it is impossible to ignore the tendency of *Ulysses*'s characters to objectify women. In his study of feminism and the figure of women in *Ulysses*, Jeri Johnson compares the views of the feminist critics Sandra Gilbert and Julia Kristeva. Kristeva, according to Johnson, is of the opinion that women in *Ulysses* do not appear as a "representation of female sexuality", but rather as a "rhetorical trope to be of service to masculine identity formation" (Johnson 206). The contrary Gilbertian view is that women's "fleshliness" is foregrounded in *Ulysses*. Johnson himself furthers this Gilbertian position with particular emphasis on Stephen, whose misogynistic articulation is "grounded in a dexterous manipulation of the figure of woman" (208). The phrases "woman's unclean loins" (Joyce 12), "naked Eve...Belly without blemish, bulging big" (Joyce 32), "Eve. Naked wheatbellied sin" (Joyce 163), etc., substantiate this statement. Apart from Stephen, several other characters also make women a subject of their frivolous sexual remarks – in the 'Sirens' episode, Father Cowley, the spoiled priest, even draws out an analogy between tympanum and hymen where he mentions the latter as "another membrane" (Joyce 222).

Molly's breast milk mentioned in the 'Penelope' episode is another trope that has been subjected to multiple interpretations. Although on one side, Bloom's assistance in sucking off the surplus milk can be seen as an empathetic gesture, some critics observe it as an allusion to patriarchal authority. The latter tendency is seen in John Bormanis's opinion that Bloom wanting to use Molly's "nice cream" is an indication of the patriarchal notion that "the mother and the products of her body are objects of male consumption"(Bormanis 594).

Luce Irigaray, in her book *This Sex Which Is Not One*, delves deeply into the issue of women becoming a commodity. She observes that women, having lost their identity and true nature, "relate to each other only in terms of what they represent in men's desire". The woman is thus required to "maintain her own body which is the object of desire" and is not expected to have any desires of her own. The 'Nausicaa' episode exemplifies Irigaray's view, which shows the young Gerty MacDowell preoccupied with others' perception of her appearance. According to Irigaray, "the economy of desire – of exchange – is man's business"(Irigaray 188). *Ulysses* has several instances of this tendency as Molly, Gerty, the pregnant Mina Purefoy, and even the childless Nurse Callan are subjected to sexual comments, with only Molly given a voice in the final chapter to assert her sexual identity, defying the men's views in the earlier chapters. Molly ponders the gruesome details of Boylan's crudeness (slapping her casually on the bottom), his 'vicious look', and the drawbacks of being a woman, a mere source of pleasure at the expense of childbearing (Blamires 188). Her words "thats all they really want out of you" (Joyce 611) bring to light the self-centered and insensitive nature of men in relationships.

'Her ninth chick to live'- Mina Purefoy's Annual Gestation

In *Ulysses*, Joyce provides several examples of the infant mortality that was prevalent in Ireland during the time. In 'Proteus', one of the midwives Stephen encounters is carrying a bag that appears to contain a navel cord, hinting at a misbirth. The navel cord, while only a part of Stephen's imagination, is most likely a reference to the high infant mortality rate in Ireland. Several studies about the effects of birth interval on child survival have shown that pregnancy losses and lower birth weight babies are more common in mothers who have repeated pregnancies and, in particular, short birth intervals because they do not have enough time for physical and nutritional recovery(Hobcraft et al. 585). Williams makes a bold remark that "women in *Ulysses* exist for sex, motherhood, and suffering. They copulate; they give birth; and they scream" (545).

The Catholic condemnation of contraception is highlighted as Bloom comes across Dilly Dedalus in 'The Lestrygonians'. Man's desire and his sense of duty to "increase and multiply" are repeatedly mentioned by Joyce. With a "birth every year almost", the Dedaluses have fifteen children despite lacking the means to raise them. However, the harsh reality of frequent pregnancies and the severity of maternal suffering is reflected in the character of Mina Purefoy who, still in labour after three full days, is expecting her ninth child(giving birth for the twelfth time) in 'Oxen of the Sun'. The episode begins by praising the Celts who have always valued and fostered an interest in medicine and established

maternity hospitals to ensure that all women, regardless of their financial situation, receive the necessary care during childbirth. However, this convention seems to have been neutralised by the Catholic view which Stephen describes as ‘a sinful abuse of our true nature’ (Blamires 120). Moreover, a growing birth rate was preferred by Irish society, which was still recuperating from the Great Famine that decimated the country’s population as a result of both deaths as well as migration.

Impudence in the Maternity Hospital

The Homeric parallel to *Ulysses’s* ‘Oxen of the Sun’ episode is Ulysses’s visit to the island of Helios. Despite Ulysses’s warning, his men slaughter the holy oxen while the former is asleep and meets with retribution. All men except Ulysses lose their lives. The Joycean parallel for this crime is, according to Joyce himself, “the crime committed against fecundity by sterilising the act of coition” (Latham 157). The fate of Ulysses’s men corresponds to that of the young medical practitioners and Stephen who end up drunk and out of their senses, while Bloom alone remains sober. The married Bloom who has suffered the personal tragedy of losing his child can comprehend the situation of the women in the hospital. However, the ribaldry of the men, although acknowledged by Bloom as the result of their youthful heedlessness, cannot be simply overlooked, particularly by feminist readers.

According to Ellmann, “the most vigorous exponent” (134) is Buck Mulligan, who expresses his plan to resolve sterility by establishing a national fertilising farm named ‘Omphalos’, where he will personally fertilise any new female entrants (Joyce 329). The mockery continues as they simultaneously rob mothers of their agency and ridicule the fathers’ potency. They doubt whether the ‘old Glory Allelujorum’ (a mocking name for Theodore Purefoy) and his “virile potency...that could still knock another child out of her” (Joyce 334). The tone of the language used highlights their impudence and may also obliquely allude to the men’s inability to maintain composure under the effect of alcohol. Although Bloom manages to maintain his temper, he wonders how in a short time “these votaries of levity” would be respectable medical practitioners. John Lee Moore observes that Dixon’s explanation of viewing the banter as part of their profession suggests medical staff’s way of considering humour as a coping mechanism that helps them deal with the incessant sounds of pain in the maternity ward and maintain their professional poise (Moore 147). Even Nurse Callan is not spared from the mockery as Costello and Mulligan resort to finding mere bodily facts about women, whether they are pregnant or not. The obscenity of the banter goes beyond the limit as the discussion progresses to obstetrical issues and birth defects, as well as briefly touching on topics like artificial insemination, menopausal womb involution, rape-induced pregnancy, and even the theory of animal-woman copulation, with a focus on the minotaur. The “terror causing shrieking of shrill women in their labour” (Joyce 320) that is echoed throughout the episode is deafening for the readers, as it brings to mind the extreme physical agony endured by mothers which the young men are conveniently and callously subjecting to ridicule. However, the inexcusable sacrilege against fertility is countered when Mina Purefoy eventually delivers the baby and reinstates the sanctity of fertility and the triumph of motherhood.

A Glimmer of Compassion

Bloom's attitude towards womanhood and motherhood, although at times ambiguous, is otherwise tempered with empathy and compassion. He acknowledges the vital role of mothers in the household as he believes that "home always breaks up when the mother goes"(Joyce 124). The ideal illustration of Bloom's concern and empathy for mothers appears in 'Oxen of the Sun'. It is sheer compassion that brings the wandering Bloom to the Maternity Hospital. While the atmosphere is deafened by the young men's clamour which Stuart Gilbert describes as "pseudo-medical bawdry" (Gilbert 295), Bloom alone is constantly reminded of Mina Purefoy's ordeal. By bringing together "the man mildhearted" and the "right witty scholars", Joyce is juxtaposing empathy with impudence. Commenting on empathy in 'Oxen of the Sun', Moore mentions that Bloom goes a step further and "identifies with the experiences of another person in a manner that seems effortless because it is so habitual" and believes that he derives this attitude from being womanly himself (152). Bloom's sense of relief and rejoicing at the news of Purefoy's "fruition of confinement" (Joyce 333) is apparent.

Bloom asks the childless Nurse Callan, "When comes the storkbird for thee?" in a joke that has been interpreted differently by critics, but Blamires observes it as Bloom's tactful way of cheering up the exhausted nurse (126). His admiration of Gerty MacDowell's legs in 'Nausicaa' emphasises his way of affirming life by eroticizing it, a tendency that can be observed in him from the beginning. Further, Bloom gives a bit of questionable advice to Molly to take advantage of her beauty in nude photography after losing his job at Hely's. Considering Bloom, the '*homo economicus*', this suggestion only portrays his rational way of thinking and erases the possibility of any sexual overtones.

Simultaneous Delivery of the Child and the Language

Frank Budgen considers 'Oxen of the Sun' to be one of the most symbolic episodes of *Ulysses*. The chaste, faithful nurse Callan symbolises the ovum, Bloom is the spermatozoon, and the young, maturing Stephen is the embryo, all contained within the womb symbolised by the Maternity Hospital (Budgen 216). Running parallel to the growth of the embryo is the evolution of English literature as the narrative style of the episode moves from alliterative Anglo-Saxon poetry to Mandeville, Malory, Elizabethan chronicles, Milton, Burton, Bunyan, Pepys, Defoe, Addison and Steele, to nigger English, Cockney and Irish, Bowery slang (Latham 157). Just as Mina Purefoy's labour and the birth of the child take us back to the origin of man, the narration makes a return to the origin of literature. The struggle of women in labour is synonymous with the laborious task of the narrator in articulating the baffling conversation of the drunken youths within two simultaneous frameworks. Susan Stanford Friedman in her article titled 'Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor' says that once Purefoy is delivered of the baby, both Joyce and the narrator of 'Oxen' are delivered of the word. While Joyce's women produce babies "through the channel of flesh", his men create a "brainchild through the agency of language" (Friedman 58).

Joyce's Female Voices

Irigaray considers "woman as a womb, the unconscious womb of man's language" (94). In Joyce's language, women are characterised in a way that oscillates between stereotypical and unconventional portrayals, with the former often overshadowing the latter.

This has subjected Joyce to be interpreted as a misogynist author, although French critics like Helene Cixous have linked his writing with *écriture féminine* (Callow 151). Julia Kristeva in her book 'Powers of Horror', a detailed study on the concept of abjection, associates with Joyce's writing "the feminine body, the maternal body, in its most un-signifiable, un-symbolizable aspect, shores up, in the individual, the fantasy of the loss in which he is engulfed or becomes inebriated, for want of the ability to name an object of desire" (Kristeva 20). According to Kristeva, the abject breaks out in Molly's monologue, providing a chance to speak about what usually gets overlooked – the struggle of women. Through the monologue, Joyce is liberating the female from the language of the male and giving her a voice of her own.

On the other hand, the anti-Joycean feminist Sandra Gilbert is of a contrasting opinion that Joyce's women are rendered intellectually shallow or impoverished and irrational (Johnson 204). Michael Zimmerman observes that Joyce's anxieties about his own body, owing to May Joyce's miscarriages and birth injuries, account for the body fetishes and identifications with the female body as well as the eroticized mother figures that *Ulysses* exhibits (Ratner 216-218). The language of Penelope, which Derek Attridge describes as "Molly's flow" has particularly been under scrutiny by critics, most of whom attribute a stereotypical nature to it. At the same time, critics like Cixous promote such a language of flow for women, who connect it with the female body's origins (Attridge 106).

By allowing the eroticization of women in the first seventeen episodes, to portray the conventional social perception of women, and ultimately letting Molly speak for herself, almost as if submitting to the woman and the mother, isn't Joyce himself promoting women's agency? As an example, discussing openly the once-taboo subject of menstruation and connecting it to the origin of men serves to remind us of our inheritance. Attridge has a similar view when he observes that if the monologue only repeated the stereotypes, we most likely would not be able to read through, much less appreciate, "thirty-five pages of her ruminations" (108). On one hand, Molly's flow foregrounds the stereotypes of the feminine, in terms of language and behaviour; on the other, the larger underlying flow of the text wipes out the same.

Molly Reaffirms Women's Agency

Although women are viewed primarily through the eyes of men for the entirety of the novel, Joyce gives the ultimate voice in *Ulysses* to a woman, allowing her to flout the male-centric views and establish her sexual identity. While the earlier episodes witness the men sexually fantasising about women, 'Penelope' witnesses the sexual fantasies of a woman. Throughout the inner monologue, Molly voices feminine sexual desires and criticises the egocentric men, as she ruminates on her past suitors and her current relationship with her husband and Boylan. Gilbert, delineating these relationships, observes that Molly acknowledges Boylan's ruthlessness but is compelled into a "reluctant admiration". Bloom, on the other hand, is the "unsatisfying husband", to whom Molly "displays a quasi-maternal affection", as a tribute to the ritually and habitually consecrated union (Gilbert 386).

According to some critics, Molly committing adultery with little remorse is indeed portraying her way of challenging and rejecting Dublin's traditional male authority. Molly justifies herself by blaming her unsatisfying sexual relationship with Bloom, who does not appreciate her enough. She still intends to re-establish it and give Bloom a second chance as she plans to dress herself in front of him. Molly here depicts the feminine yearning for both affection and sensual pleasure. Defying the male perceptions of her body, Molly succeeds in reinstating control over her body. She considers using red ink to trick men for whom a stain of blood on the bed is crucial to ensure the virginity of the woman (Joyce 633). Despising Boylan's crudeness and Bloom's insensitiveness, she believes that men treat women "like dirt". Her ultimate reaction is to Joyce himself as she says "O Jamesy let me up out of this pooh" (Joyce 633). Flouting the ultimate authority, that is the authorial authority, she pines to be out of her frustration which could either be the result of her life as a woman or of the inner monologue itself. Reading further, we discover that Molly's resentment is towards the feminine life itself which is conventionally made to oscillate between household chores and the rearing of children, or else is confined to the bed (Joyce 633).

In addition to reclaiming the agency of women, Molly also tries to uphold the maternal agency. She rightfully claims that "they wouldn't be in the world at all only for us they don't know what it is to be a woman and a mother how could they where would they all of them be if they hadn't all a mother to look after them" (Joyce 640). Moreover, Gilbert associates women's fertility with that of nature and considers Molly's voice as "the voice of nature herself"(400). He substantiates this observation by pointing out several instances in the inner monologue where Molly is representing nature – calling herself "a flower of the mountain", seeing flowers "like the stars", and feeling "all fire" inside her. According to Frank Budgen, Molly is the most symbolic character in *Ulysses*. She symbolises "the teeming earth with her countless brood of created things" which endows her the title of Gea-Tellus (262). 'Penelope' can be read as a woman's audacious response to the impertinence of the men in 'Oxen of the Sun'. Thus, despite the regulatory factors, Molly manages to find a space of her own, which the sociologist Erving Goffman theorised as the "backstage". She succeeds in projecting her desires into an institution that otherwise suppresses sexuality. Molly's antidote to the nightmare of history dreaded by Stephen is to eroticize everyday life.

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