

The Green Fairy of Dublin: Absinthe in James Joyce's *Ulysses*

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Prior to reading James Joyce's modernist epic *Ulysses*, banned everywhere except Paris upon its 1922 publication, I fancied myself somewhat knowledgeable about Irish drinking culture; after all, I already knew that Guinness is good for you. However, I received a more well-rounded education from within Joyce's richly detailed portrayal of early twentieth-century Dublin life, through his frequent references to alcohol consumption, which gave new meaning to *Cosmopolitan* magazine aphorisms regarding what a man's drink says about him. In particular, the disaffected poet Stephen Dedalus and his potation of choice, absinthe, struck my interest because I felt that the surreal incidents depicted in the episode "Circe" were representative of the psychological effects of the liqueur on Stephen. Joyce's use of absinthe as a symbol in *Ulysses* is intrinsically connected to Stephen Dedalus' role as a bohemian artist who rejects bourgeois notions of identity in favor of ineluctable truths. The content of "Circe," written in play script format, illustrates absinthe-induced hallucinations, lending the episode a surreal quality that presciently evokes experimental cinema and bears striking thematic similarities to Baz Luhrmann's 2001 film *Moulin Rouge!* Stephen's taste for absinthe also has larger implications related to his student days in Paris during which he met Irish nationalist Kevin Egan. David M. Earle's 2003 article "Green eyes, I see you. Fang, I feel": The Symbol of Absinthe in "Ulysses" supports the claims that I will make about the symbolic meanings attributed to absinthe in *Ulysses* and introduces two contemporaneous illustrations of absinthe consumption that I will discuss in context with Stephen Dedalus: Édouard Manet's *The Absinthe Drinker* and Edgar Degas' *L'Absinthe*.

In "Oxen of the Sun," the episode preceding "Circe," Stephen spends his latest paycheck on rounds of absinthe for him and his friends, announcing in Latin, "*Nos omnes biberimus viridum toxicum, diabolus capiat posterioria nostra* [We will all drink green poison and the devil take the hindmost (Gifford and Seidman 446)]" (Joyce 348). Unsurprisingly, Stephen is severely intoxicated when Leopold Bloom re-encounters him inside a brothel during the "Circe" episode and decides to protect the younger Dedalus out of paternal instinct. Bloom and Stephen's shared tastes for foreign alcohol, the latter for absinthe and former for Burgundy, are representative of these characters' social position outside the norms of Irish drinking culture. After breaking a chandelier in the brothel, Stephen, escaping from the angry madame Bella Cohen, gets into an argument with a couple of English soldiers, whom Bloom attempts to placate: "BLOOM: (*to the privates, softly*) He doesn't know what he's saying. Taken a little more than is good for him. Absinthe. Greeneyed monster. I know him. He's a gentleman, a poet. It's all right" (Joyce 483). Although the conflict escalates into a street fight that leaves Stephen unconscious in the gutter by the end of the episode, Bloom's unsuccessful appeal is interesting in that he explicitly refers to absinthe as the "greeneyed monster." This, I would posit, is an allusion to Iago's description of jealousy in Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello* as well as to traditional conceptions of absinthe as a destructive hallucinogen embodied by a green fairy with diabolical red eyes. Bloom's mention of Stephen being a poet is also relevant in the context of the latter having consumed absinthe since absinthe was the favored alcohol of prominent turn-of-the-century writers and artists living in Paris, probably the most relevant of whom was Irish poet and writer Oscar Wilde (Earle 692).

Set in Dublin's red-light district Nighttown, the events that are described during the

“Circe” episode reveal the psychological impact that absinthe has had on Stephen. Inside Bella Cohen’s brothel, Stephen’s first appearance in the chapter features him standing on a piano carrying on an intellectual conversation about ancient Greek music (Gifford and Seidman 487) with his interlocutor represented as “The Cap,” which belongs to his friend Lynch (Joyce 411). At another moment in “Circe,” a prostitute likens Stephen to a seminarian, provoking his vision of himself as a Roman Catholic cardinal wearing a rosary made out of corks (Joyce 427), an allusion to drinking as religious ritual in Irish culture. Once Bloom takes an intoxicated Stephen into his care by holding onto his money for him, they both look into a mirror and although it is unclear whether the reflection is being described from Stephen or Bloom’s point of view, the image of an antlered William Shakespeare appears in the glass with them. During the climactic brothel scene of the episode, after whirling around the room with each of the prostitutes, Stephen sees a vision of his dead mother, whom he tries to ward off with his walking stick and in doing so, accidentally smashes the chandelier. Joyce’s description of Stephen’s mother morphing into a “green crab with malignant red eyes” (475) suggests that absinthe has brought about Stephen’s hallucinations and is the reason for his irrational behavior, as Bloom confirms to the English soldiers with the aforementioned quote.

In his article, Earle affirms that, “absinthe is the stimulus for the hallucinations and visual displacement of “Circe” ” (695). Similarly, absinthe in the form of a green fairy figures as the impetus for the phantasmagorical quality of the following scene in the film *Moulin Rouge!* The film, based on Verdi’s opera *La Traviata* and set in Paris’ red-light district at the turn of the twentieth century, parallels the “Circe” episode of *Ulysses* not only due to the surrealism of both texts but also because of the resemblances between Stephen Dedalus and Christian, the protagonist of *Moulin Rouge!* While on an obvious level, both share a relatively newfound affinity for absinthe, they are also writers, one English and the other Irish, who live or have lived in Paris, where they immersed themselves in early twentieth-century bohemian culture. The conception of the eager young bohemian artist, represented by Christian in *Moulin Rouge!* and Stephen in *Ulysses*, is explicitly linked to absinthe, which is “a peculiarly modernist symbol of disruption – both of sensory perception and stylistic portrayal – as a means for artistic clarity of vision, as a symbol of failure, defeat, persecution and exile” (Earle 692). Due to the liqueur’s affiliation with Paris, where it first became popular in working-class cafes with such bohemian artists as the French poets Rimbaud and Verlaine (Earle 693), both Christian and Stephen are depicted as seeking to emulate their literary predecessors in partaking of the drink. The *Moulin Rouge!* scene identifies the fundamental beliefs of bohemian culture as “freedom, beauty, truth and love,” the last of which is at the heart of the myriad thoughts and incidents that are transcribed in *Ulysses* and which Stephen contemplates in the “Proteus” episode: “What is that word known to all men?” (Joyce 41)

The first mention of absinthe in *Ulysses* appears in the “Proteus” episode, during Stephen’s meditations on the beach at Dublin Bay when he remembers making the acquaintance of the Irish nationalist Kevin Egan in Paris, “sipping his green fairy” (Joyce 36). As Earle expounds upon in his article, “Absinthe’s color has clear political overtones in the text” (699). Through its association with anti-establishment bohemian artists, absinthe is a drink symbolic of early nineteenth-century counterculture; by drinking it straight so that it retains its green color, which is culturally symbolic of Ireland, Kevin Egan comes to represent the drawbacks of Irish nationalism. Exiled in Paris, Egan, in Stephen’s description, seems to have become an alcoholic whose plans for rebellion have been reduced to his rolling “gunpowder cigarettes” (Joyce 36). Perhaps Stephen’s consumption of absinthe in “Circe,” after recalling Kevin Egan earlier in the

day, represents the younger man's support of Egan's cause. However, implicit in Egan's choice of beverage are associations of failure, which one could presume to be Stephen's fate if he continues to imbibe vast quantities of absinthe on a regular basis.

The artistic representations involving the liqueur that Earle mentions in his article convey the underlying sentiment that absinthe is responsible for personal and cultural depravity. One of the first paintings to use absinthe as a symbol (Earle 693), Édouard Manet's seminal work *The Absinthe Drinker* was refused for exhibition at the 1859 Salon held by the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in Paris because it pushed the envelope of Academic tradition. This portrait of a debauched French rag-picker with a glass of absinthe beside him and a presumably empty bottle on the ground in front of him epitomizes dejection in conjunction with alcohol consumption. Edgar Degas, one of Manet's contemporaries, also portrayed absinthe in his 1876 painting *L'Absinthe*, which features a bohemian couple drinking the liqueur at a café. The differences in context between Manet and Degas' paintings show how absinthe became popularized and thus normalized over the course of almost two decades. By the turn of the century, absinthe was ingrained in bohemian culture as a signifier of the artist as a "social pariah" and "disruptor of the social and cultural status quo" (Earle 702), which renders it appropriate to Joyce's representation of Stephen Dedalus in *Ulysses*.

Throughout "Circe," the longest and most surreal of the eighteen episodes in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, hovers the green fairy of Dublin who brings to life the innermost dreams, desires, and fears portrayed in this chapter. The green fairy is absinthe, Stephen's symbolically-laden drink of the evening, which has links to his past as a student in Paris, is responsible for his present in Nighttown and will potentially determine his future as a budding artist and writer.

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