

Ulysses, Dubliners, and the Nature of Relationships in the Modern World

JUSTIN LEVENSTEIN

The realities of love and marriage are a prevalent theme in James Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Dubliners*, as he attempts to depict the dynamics of the modern relationship and the hardships that develop throughout this cycle. In both texts, Joyce strives to provide a female perspective of marriage that is often lacking in the male-dominated Ireland. Marriage in these texts becomes a struggle between opposing forces: love, regret, and superficiality. *Ulysses* concludes with Molly Bloom's internal monologue, in which the text quite literally follows her complex thought process and the conflicting emotions that she feels towards her husband, Leopold Bloom. Molly examines the many relationships in her life, weighing her past lovers as well as her current suitors with her strange relationship with Leopold. In relation to Penelope, her counterpart from Homer's *Odyssey*, Molly represents a female character grounded in reality that diverges from the idealized image of the innocent and faithful wife that Penelope embodies. The contrast between Molly and Penelope provides a more realistic approach to the typical epic, while simultaneously maintaining some of the qualities that readers are familiar with. Likewise, "The Boarding House" juxtaposes these opposing notions of marriage through Mrs. Mooney and her daughter, Polly. Mrs. Mooney's failed marriage is projected onto her expectations for Polly; similarly, the disapproval of the priest provokes Mr. Doran to reconsider the idea of marriage to a woman with a lower status than himself. To the characters in "The Boarding House," one's image in society becomes more important than love and desire. Regret and the superficial drive the thoughts of the characters in both narratives to the point where love seems like an impossibility. The notion of love is threatened in both of these texts by an anxiety brought about by the superficiality of the modern world. These characters' struggles manifest themselves in the form of internal battles, which reveal an additional layer of unspoken dialogue that exemplifies the complexity of upholding a meaningful relationship in modern society.

From the very first sentence of "Penelope," which begins in the middle of a thought, the reader is exposed to the most intimate aspect of a human being: their inner voice. Joyce allows Molly Bloom's mind to ponder various recollections that frequently pertain to or lead to the thought of sex, which establishes her as a free woman, as well as primary female voice in *Ulysses*. Viewing *Ulysses* as the epic that symbolizes Dublin society as a whole, this final chapter is representative of the unheard female voice. Joyce's establishment of Molly as a sexual being both adds to the realism of the narrative as a whole, while simultaneously creating an unconventional female role that defies the boundaries put in place by a society controlled largely by men.

Molly represents the modernist counterpart of Penelope, Odysseus' wife in Homer's *Odyssey*. The events that occur throughout the day in *Ulysses* correlate with those in *Odyssey*, yet one crucial difference is the depiction of Molly as an unfaithful wife. Penelope, who refuses to give up on her husband's return, remains faithful to Odysseus and does not surrender to the coercion of her many suitors. She embodies the archetype of the innocent, faithful wife, the polar opposite of Molly Bloom. The paradox of Molly is rooted in the fact that she represents the archetypal figure of Penelope by assuming qualities that directly oppose this very figure. As a modernist interpretation of the Greek epic, Joyce strives to ground the characters in reality, making them flawed and thus relatable as human beings. However, Joyce also references a more traditional love narrative in Molly and Leopold's turbulent, but ultimately hopeful relationship. This combination creates a sense of familiarity while also providing a new angle of the epic for a modern-day audience. In addition, allowing unrestricted access to Molly's innermost thoughts, coupled with the idea of a flawed and relatable human, incites sympathy for the character despite

her infidelity. Joyce strays from the notion of the idealized in constructing the thoughts and actions of Molly Bloom, as perfection is an unattainable quality in the realistic depiction of Dublin.

As a stream-of-consciousness narrative, the thoughts swirling in Molly's head during the "Penelope" chapter naturally jump from one topic to another. Throughout the chapter, her mind is constantly moving between her husband and the various "suitors" throughout her life, specifically the most recent, Blazes Boylan. The distinction between Leopold and these other men is that Molly focuses on the emotional aspect of her relationship with her husband, while thoughts concerning these other men are somewhat shallow. When her mind wanders to the infidelity with Boylan that took place that same day, her entire focus is on the sexual aspect of their relationship. This relationship is empty in terms of emotion, and Molly is therefore engaging with the superficial aspect of the Dublin lifestyle. In the first paragraph of "Penelope," Molly reminisces on her sexual encounter with Boylan earlier that same day, while simultaneously pondering Leopold's past encounters with other women (608-613). Her mind becomes caught up in the emotionless physicality of relationships between human beings, which characterizes the superficial nature of relationships in modern times.

These superficial thoughts eventually lead Molly to doubt the strength of her marriage, thus bringing a sense of regret into the text. This regret is indicated in statements such as "I could have been a prima donna but I married [Leopold]" (628). In this chapter, regret is a direct result of superficiality in Dublin, as characters momentarily overlook the meaningful parts of their relationships with one another. Molly engages with this superficiality through her complex thought process, which leads to the anxiety that her life may have been better had she not married Leopold. Anxiety characterizes the emotional crippling brought about by superficiality in the modern world. More specifically, superficiality triggers Molly to reminisce on her unchangeable past decisions rather than focus on the aspects of her life that she actually has control of in the present, thus placing her relationship with Leopold in danger of falling to the emptiness of modern society.

In contrast to the majority of the chapter, the conclusion of "Penelope" instills a sense of hope for the future of Molly and Leopold, indicating that their relationship is strong enough to withstand this superficiality of modern times. The final word in the narrative, a simple "yes," is a powerful confirmation that Molly's emotional connection with Bloom has been meaningful in the past and will continue to be in the future (644). The most interesting aspect of this confirmation is that despite the physical and mental infidelities that both Molly and Leopold have committed throughout this single day, the narrative still ends without a single doubt regarding the integrity and permanence of their marriage. Strangely, both of these characters interact with the superficial during their day, but are constantly being brought back to one another through the various memories and spontaneous thoughts that occur in stream-of-consciousness writing.

The key to understanding the dynamics of Molly and Leopold's resilient marriage lies in the fact that their sexual escapades with other people are often balanced out by an emotional response that triggers the thought of one another. Molly and Leopold therefore perfectly complement each other's personalities in that they both assume characteristics of the opposite sex, thus embodying the idea of an "androgynous" male and female (Sadowski 143). Upon reexamining "Penelope" with this concept, the conflicting nature of Molly's mind, with concern for both the physical aspect of her affair with Boylan as well as her emotional bond with Bloom, is characteristic of both a traditionally male and female thought process. Molly's thoughts reveal a more sexually aggressive and uninhibited side to her that is only seen during this exploration of her inner voice. These thoughts, along with the fact that Molly does act on some of these sexual

desires, represents her an envy for “men [for] their freedom in sexual matters” as well as her subsequent “reluctance to accept herself as only a woman” (Sadowski 156). This reluctance drives her to view men similarly to the way view women; for example, when reminiscing on her encounter with Boylan earlier that day, she specifically focuses on the fact that he is well endowed. Molly essentially objectifies men and turns the traditional notion of gender roles and privileges on its head. The nature of Molly’s character is that she is incapable of identifying with a single gender; on one hand, she fulfills both motherly and spousal obligations, yet on the other, she exudes a more aggressive and masculine confidence through her thoughts and actions. Her affair with Boylan is a prime example of this dichotomy, as she is able to drop everything and act with spontaneity and a self-proclaimed freedom, but she ultimately returns to her womanly obligations at the end of the narrative.

Leopold, who experiences sexual pleasure through women other than Molly throughout the day, possesses some of the typical male characteristics that Molly takes on, but as an androgynous character, he also exhibits many feminine characteristics. At one hallucinatory point in the narrative, these characteristics manifest themselves and literally transform Leopold into a woman, causing him to give birth and receive abuse from Bella at the brothel (403). This transformation forces Leopold takes into the role of the submissive female, creating an interesting sub-narrative of gender transformation throughout *Ulysses*. This submissiveness during the hallucination is a direct reference to Leopold’s figurative femininity throughout the rest of the text. As the feminine counterpart to Molly’s masculinity, Leopold becomes obsessed by Molly and Boylan’s sexual encounter, which he anticipates for most of his day. Molly places Leopold in a situation where he must submit to his wife’s masculine aggressiveness and freedom. However, it is in this alternating relationship that their marriage finds the perfect balance and allows them to maintain their sense of stability.

The psychology of *Ulysses* presents the complex thought processes of both Molly and Leopold during a single day in Dublin. For the majority of the narrative, it seems as if their marriage will eventually fail due to infidelities on both of their parts. However, Joyce’s exploration of these thoughts reveals one important commonality between their minds. Regardless of the infidelity and thoughts of other men or women, both Molly and Leopold’s mind always return to the thought of their relationship, which has the most substance of all the relationships in *Ulysses*. For example, in “Penelope,” despite Molly’s seeming regret for past decisions, along with thoughts of her past suitors, her mental being ultimately returns to the point in her relationship with Leopold where he proposes to her (643-644). In terms of this marriage, the narrative ends with the beginning, which signifies that at the end of this long and eventful day, their relationship has been renewed and is in fact stronger than it has been at any other point in the narrative. The fact that Leopold and Molly are both androgynous creates a perfect balance between the two; where one exhibits more feminine features, the other’s masculinity complements these features perfectly, and vice-versa.

A complex exploration of gender roles is a highly visible theme throughout *Ulysses*, which also contributes to this notion of the superficial in modern relationships. As Leopold and Molly demonstrate, genders are not easily definable in *Ulysses*. Both masculinity and femininity in the text are relatable to this concept of superficiality, as they both prevent the development of a meaningful relationship. Masculinity causes infidelity while femininity leads to submissiveness, and therefore, entrapment in the characters’ own minds. The androgynous character reconciles these two extremes, allowing the shortcomings of both to be countered by one another, creating a point of equilibrium. The masculine and feminine extremes act as Joyce’s criticism of gender norms as they appear in daily life in Dublin. Joyce employs the lasting bond between Molly and Leopold to demonstrate that a meaningful relationship in a world full of superficiality is a

combination of these two extremes. Joyce suggests that a clear-cut gender system pits one extreme in conflict with another, whereas finding a balance between the two creates meaningful and lasting relationships. Similar to his other works, Joyce places the solution for Molly and Leopold in the idea of balance rather than extremism, which combats and ultimately trumps the superficiality of modern society and the threat it poses to a significant relationship.

Joyce's *Dubliners*, specifically "The Boarding House," depicts a struggle similar to Molly and Leopold's in *Ulysses*. Mrs. Mooney's boarding house, which acts as a symbol for Dublin society as a whole, is the microcosm where the three main characters struggle to form meaningful relationships. Mrs. Mooney, her daughter Polly, and Mr. Doran all experience a form of anxiety and the pressure of superficiality as it pertains relationships. Many of the same themes regarding a meaningful relationship that appear in *Ulysses* are also apparent in "The Boarding House." Mrs. Mooney's past infringes on the present, causing her to stress the importance of status rather than true love to Polly. Similarly, Mr. Doran is enslaved by the proper image that one must uphold in a superficial society, causing him to doubt his love for Polly. Joyce again focuses on the psychological aspect of these characters to create realistic internal struggles that produces a sense of regret and initiates a paralysis that hinders the situation's progress.

Mrs. Mooney's past experiences, as well as the woman she has become, is reminiscent of the psychologically complex Molly Bloom. At the beginning of the novel, the first thing that is revealed about Mrs. Mooney is that her former husband was a "drunk" who "went for [her] with the cleaver," thus causing them to separate (38). Similar to Molly Bloom, whose thoughts begin to focus on the past, Mrs. Mooney's past haunts her in the present, which forms her attitude toward the notion of her daughter Polly getting married. Mrs. Mooney turns the process of relationships and marriage into a business, where she silently monitors and judges her daughter's suitors. The narrative refers to her judgment of the men in the boarding house who flirt with Polly. The narrator states that Mrs. Mooney "knew that the young men were only passing the time away; none of them meant business" (39). The reference to the process of winning over her daughter's affection as a business indicates that Mrs. Mooney has been conditioned to act as though real feelings are not a part of this process. Her past marriage to her abusive husband has caused her to approach relationships in a business-like sense and suppress emotions as a defense mechanism against the possibility of her daughter ending up in a dangerous situation like she was once in. Like Molly Bloom, a certain regret for past decisions manipulates Mrs. Mooney's reason in the present. In this sense, the past is very much a living entity that influences behavior and thoughts in the present.

Mrs. Mooney, like Molly Bloom, interacts with the superficiality of the modern world in her treatment of her daughter's many suitors. The narrator states that Polly has previously flirted with a "disreputable" man who would come into her workplace each day; Mrs. Mooney responds to this knowledge by taking "her daughter home again and [setting] her to do housework (39). This indicates that Mrs. Mooney has shifted her concern for her daughter's future from true love to status in society. Similar to the sexual thoughts of Boylan that Molly has, Mrs. Mooney's past experience has caused her to lose concern for any relationship with substance and ascribe to the shallowness of modern relationships. Based on her system of approval for her daughter's love interests, marriage is a means by which one profits and moves up the social ladder above all else. Mrs. Mooney limits and thus traps her daughter in this system, infringing on her own free will because of the emotional hardening that has occurred within herself and has caused her to align with superficiality.

The notion of androgyny appears in "The Boarding House," yet unlike *Ulysses*, where androgyny brings about a balance to the extremes of femininity and masculinity, it only

reinforces the empty relationships between characters in the narrative. According to Earl G. Ingersoll, Mrs. Mooney assumes masculinity through her “activity and decisiveness,” while simultaneously taking on femininity with a “concern for detail” (501). Mrs. Mooney ultimately decides whom Polly will marry, yet during this process, she carefully scrutinizes the relationships that her daughter forms. In this sense, she is both the mother and father figure for her daughter. Though Mrs. Mooney does reach a point where her masculine and feminine characteristics balance out, they do so in such a way that it enhances her ability to disconnect from emotions and continue her business of finding a proper suitor for her daughter. Again, her past experience with her former husband is the main perpetrator in this case, as she has become acclimatized to running every aspect of her life similar to how she operates her boarding house. Mrs. Mooney thus becomes the “plotter” of the narrative, who acts as both one of the obstacles to attaining real love and a character that draws sympathy from the reader (501). In the Dublin of *Ulysses*, androgyny and a sense of balance brings about a solution, whereas in “The Boarding House,” they only perpetuate the superficiality of the business that forming relationships has become.

Polly’s encounters with Mr. Doran begin to flourish into a relationship, at which point Mrs. Mooney begins to quietly scrutinize them. Mr. Doran’s status and success in life is not an issue, so Mrs. Mooney arranges a meeting where she will attempt to coerce him into marrying Polly (39). At this point, the narrative switches over to Mr. Doran’s viewpoint, in which it is revealed that he is experiencing anxiety due to the pressures of a society concerned with appearance and status. He, like Mrs. Mooney, is affected by the notion of social status; however, he is more concerned with the fact that he will be marrying a woman of lower status, which is worsened by a priest’s criticism of his affair with Polly during confession (41). The theme of extremism appears at this point in the narrative, as Mr. Doran is placed in a position where he must decide whether he will marry Polly or abandon her completely. These two extremes render Mr. Doran helpless. Following his rationale, both extremes will negatively impact his reputation, thus placing a paralysis on his life at this crossroad. In Mr. Doran’s case, the superficiality of modern times completely disallows the notion of a relationship based on true love, and instead allows only for a relationship based on class and appearance to the rest of society.

Mr. Doran and Mrs. Mooney’s dilemmas in “The Boarding House” are a direct reflection of the obstacles that Molly and Leopold overcome throughout the day. Mrs. Doran embodies the idea of the balance found in androgyny, while Mr. Doran is characterized by the restricting effects of extremism in Dublin society. The boarding house itself, which acts as a miniaturized Dublin in the interactions between characters and in the way it is operated by Mrs. Mooney, indicate an ongoing struggle of producing meaning in a society that thrives on superficiality. The shortcomings of extremism and the necessity of balance in life are apparent themes throughout the majority of Joyce’s texts. Extremism’s appearance in both of these narratives, which causes psychological conflict within each of these characters, acts as Joyce’s criticism of a black-and-white world where one must align him or herself on one side or the other.

The other common theme in both of these narratives, balance, is the point at which the narratives diverge. In contrast to *Ulysses*, in which Leopold and Molly ultimately find their sense of balance, “The Boarding House,” as well as the other stories in *Dubliners*, lack real solutions to the characters’ dilemmas. This fact is in line with the open nature of all of the conclusions in *Dubliners*. These narratives generally end without a solid conclusion and leave the reader guessing what crucial decision the characters will come to. Though there is a degree of uncertainty in both narratives, *Ulysses* concludes with a sense of hope for the future of Leopold and Molly’s marriage. While “The Boarding House” hints that Mr. Doran will ultimately ask Polly to marry him, the narrative never brings closure to his previous concern about marrying into the lower class, leaving the reader questioning the longevity of their relationship. The only clues

the reader is granted are Mr. Doran's paralysis as well as his doubts towards marrying Polly. The fact that Joyce leaves only these details to his readers creates a very negative atmosphere, especially when considered with the lack of conclusion to the story. Very little is certain within *Dubliners* as a whole, but one common thread that brings the stories together is found in the sudden endings that leave the narrative open on a low point. Where the future for Molly and Leopold possesses some degree of certainty for a long-lasting relationship, the lack of any certainty at the end of "The Boarding House," coupled with Mr. Doran's doubts about Polly, hints that their union will likely fail at some point in the future. Therefore, in "The Boarding House," superficiality is never overcome, leaving meaningful relationships to become obsolete in the modern world.

With *Ulysses* and "The Boarding House," Joyce imagines two distinct views of Dublin. Both of these narratives are common in the sense that they explore the dynamics of a relationship in a world characterized by the superficial. Both texts also relate the idea of the androgynous character as it relates to extremism in Dublin. In *Ulysses*, androgyny functions as a combatant of superficiality, allowing Molly and Leopold to counter the male and female aspects of one another and thus develop into the a couple that interconnects almost perfectly. The imperfect nature of both Molly and Leopold creates characters that the reader can both identify and thus sympathize with. Regardless of her imperfections, Molly acts as the modern-day counterpart to the *Odyssey's* Penelope, in that at the end of her day, she and her husband have been reunited, and their life together will begin again the next day. Despite her infidelities, Molly is essentially the less-idealized image of Penelope in the midst of a material and superficial society. Ultimately, both Leopold and Molly's imperfections lead them back to one another and into a hopeful future for their marriage. "The Boarding House" provides a darker view of the modern relationship in Dublin. While androgyny is also a prevalent theme in regards to Mrs. Mooney, a concern for the superficial caused by past experiences hinders these characters from making any progress towards a meaningful relationship. The primary concern with Mrs. Mooney and Mr. Doran continues to be appearance, which continues to define relationships in the microcosm of Dublin that the boarding house represents. The lack of any closure in "The Boarding House" is the polar opposite of the conclusion of *Ulysses*, in that the negative tone expresses uncertainty for the future of Mr. Doran and Polly. The characters in "The Boarding House" represent the full effects of modernity and superficiality on relationships. When compared to Molly and Leopold, the imminent failure of the characters in *Dubliners* attests to the strength of Molly's marriage. Despite their shortcomings and interactions with the superficial, Molly and Leopold are still able to maintain a relationship with true love as its foundation. Both narratives demonstrate the hardships of forming and preserving a stable relationship with the many instabilities of a society that allows superficiality to become such a prominent characteristic of interactions between people. The fact that Molly and Leopold ultimately return to one another after their eventful day has come to a close indicates that their love is characterized by both immense strength as well as longevity.

Works Cited

- Ingersoll, Earl G. "The Stigma of Femininity in James Joyce's 'Eveline' and 'The Boarding House.'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 30.4 (1993): 501-510. Print.
- Joyce, James. *Dubliners*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1991. Print.
- Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1986. Print.
- Sadowski, Piotr. "Androgyny and (Near) Perfect Marriage: A Systems View of the Genders of Leopold and Molly Bloom." *Style* 44.1/2 (2010): 139-161. Print.