The function of parody in ulysses

The word “ parody” comes from the Latin parodia, meaning “ burlesque song or poem”, but it has come to refer to any artistic composition in which “ the characteristic themes and the style of a particular work, author, etc., are exaggerated or applied to an inappropriate subject for the purposes of ridicule.” Parody is used throughout Ulysses both as a form of comedy and as a critique. In the “ Cyclops” episode, parody functions as a critique of the grand narrative, specifically in terms of history and the discourse of the nineteenth century. Parody is further used in order to subvert existing structures and hierarchies, as is apparent through the elements of Bakhtin’s conception of the Carnivale, which are present in the episode. In “ Nausicaa”, Joyce parodies aspects of popular culture, particularly romance fiction and the censorship debate. This technique serves to highlight the relationship between language and consciousness, as well as the way in which discourses are constructed and interact with each other. By using parody, Joyce appears to be critiquing aspects of society and questioning the manner in which language is used to convey meaning. Parody in “ Cyclops” serves to disrupt conventional notions of narrative. In particular, Joyce appears to be critiquing the notion of history as a grand narrative. The elevated language of the episode, as can be seen in the passage describing “ a historic and a hefty battle,” acts as a parody of the literature drawn on by Irish nationalists in order to idealize Ireland’s heroic past. These writers offered popular versions of mythology using writing styles similar to nineteenth-century writers such as Carlyle. For the twentieth-century reader, however, these allusions might seem pretentious and inflated; Joyce appears to be parodying the passionate nationalists who celebrated the heroic past of the Irish people in this manner. The list of names of heroic leaders in “

Cyclops” descends into complete farce, as it lists figures completely unconnected with Ireland, such as “ Gautama Buddha” and “ Jack the Giant Killer”, as well as some names that are simply invented. Joyce likewise parodies this idea of mindless drivel by concluding the narrator’s speeches with phrases such as “ and so forth and so on”, “ this phenomenon and the other phenomenon”, and “ new Ireland and new this, that and the other”. These parodies reveal that extreme Irish nationalists grasped at almost anything to further their mission. Thematically, Joyce establishes an ongoing dialogue between Bloom’s “ humanistic universalism” and the citizen’s narrow nationalism. The citizen refuses to acknowledge the possibility that Bloom can claim Ireland as his nation whilst also being a Jew. Bloom, on the other hand, postulates the humanistic view that “ force, hatred, history… that’s not life for men and women…love…the opposite of hatred…that is really life.” Joyce seems to be critiquing the often fanatical nature of Irish nationalism, specifically the manner in which heroism is figured in terms of violence, and the fact that this fanaticism is encouraged at a cost to humanity. Furthermore, Joyce appears to be critiquing the grand narrative of nineteenth-century discourse. He does so firstly by juxtaposing colloquial passages narrated by an anonymous Dubliner with grandiose mythic passages such as “ the nec and non plus ultra of emotion were reached when the blushing bride elect burst her way through…and flung herself upon the muscular bosom of him who was about to be launched into eternity.” The ridiculousness of this bombastic style is furthered by the subject matter: a wedding of trees. Indeed, the juxtaposition of this language with the narrator’s colloquial “ God blimey if she aint a clinker” highlights the pretentiousness of the elevated form. Joyce uses an exaggerated multiplicity

of adjectives such as “ broadshouldered deepchested stronglimbed frankeyed redhaired freely freckled” to parody an overly descriptive style of writing and critique the imperialist nature of grand narratives that claim to offer a comprehensive view of events. In doing so, Joyce demonstrates an awareness that aspects of nineteenth-century literature cannot be translated. He appears to be critiquing the extent to which people who sought independence for Ireland attempted to translate to the twentieth-century notions that belong to the past and could not be recovered – especially not via inflated language. There is no clear narrative voice in this episode, as Joyce rapidly transitions from one narrative style to another. The shifting narrative also serves as a parody of the pretentious writing of the nineteenth century. Like the one-eyed Polyphemus in the Homeric parallel, each narrative presents a single view, offering the reader separate eyewitnesses who interrupt and contradict each other. This enables the characters to undergo a metamorphosis between various narrative frames. The medical journal parody, for example, transforms Bloom’s muddled scientific knowledge into a precise explication of physiology, as he becomes “ Herr Professor Luitpold Blumenduft.” Through other narratives, the reader gets a vision of Bloom as a hero “ O’Bloom, the son of Rory,” Bloom the “ distinguished phenomenologist,” and ultimately “ ben Bloom Elijah.” Joyce also appears to be engaging this type of narration in an effort to both define and limit it to a narrative structure. In doing so, he explores the breakdown in narration. At times, this occurs in the midst of a sentence, as in the episode’s final words: “ ben Bloom Elijah, amid clouds of angels ascend to the glory of the brightness…at an angle of fortyfive degrees…like a shot off a shovel.” The sentence begins as a Biblical epic, shifts to a quasi-science

journalistic style, and then shifts once again to colloquialism. The structure resembles a comic routine, with different voices presenting different views, which in turn highlight the unreliability of each individual perspective. Interestingly, Homer's Polyphemus is both one-eyed and multi-vocal, echoing the ambiguities that Joyce explores in the episode. The parody in " Cyclops" can thus be seen as a microcosm of the parody of Ulysses the novel; that is to say, a parody of the epic form. Parody further functions to subvert existing structures and hierarchies. The events in " Cyclops" echo the revelries of the Carnivale as conceptualised by Bakhtin. Bakhtin underlines the predominance of " the material principle and the physical life with images of the body, or eating and drinking, and with the satisfaction of the natural urges." The pub is site for informal socializing – the characters are tipsy from drink, and the environment is conducive to the kind of revelry associated with the Carnivale. There is a sense of anarchy about the episode, with characters indulging in excess, "[nearly eating] the tin and all," and laying emphasis on the nether parts of the body, such as Molly Bloom's bottom and the hanged man's erection. Joyce appears to be staging a verbal carnival, first through the polyphony of voices, specifically the alternation of the lofty and vulgar styles, and secondly through the wordplay that characterises much of the episode. Within the episode are examples of antanaclasis (" Good Christ!…Who said Christ is good?"), etymology (" barber/barbarous/barbarian"), puns (" foul/fowl"), neologism (" codology") and non-sequiteurs (" talking about new Ireland, he ought to go and get a new dog so he ought"). Parrinder characterises a carnival as a " world… turned bottom upwards…a forum in which a behaviour that is normally frowned upon…becomes sanctioned and overt." In a carnival, the highest

authority (usually the King) is insulted and beaten by the people. In “ Cyclops”, Bloom is presented as this figure, the image of him “ on point duty up” suggesting his superiority, which is highlighted by his refusal to join in the drinking session. It is thus significant that the end of the episode finds him being insulted and set upon by the dogs. The carnival is also a place where religion is parodied, and in this episode God undergoes a plethora of irreverent metamorphoses: “ begob…Christ M’Keown…dog.” Here, the parody functions as a subversion of these figures of authority. In “ Nausicaa”, parody serves as a critique of popular culture and highlights the manner in which aspects of popular culture seep into our consciousness. Gerty McDowell’s language and consciousness is an amalgam of romance literature, fashion magazines, advertising, and folk wisdom. The first half of “ Nausicaa” is often read as a parody of the sentimental novel, and particularly The Lamplighter, written by Maria Cummins in 1864, which features a heroine named “ Gertrude”. The frequent usage of exclamation marks, as in “ O so lively! O so soft, sweet, soft!” and exaggerated use of “ O!” parodies the emotive, heightened language of romance fiction. Joyce himself referred to the language of this half of the episode as “ namby-pamby jammy marmalady drawsery.” Interestingly, many of the references to fashion magazines and advertising occur in parenthesis, such as “(because it was expected in the Lady’s Pictorial that electric blue would be worn),” suggesting a kind of ‘ aside’, as if these aspects of popular culture create resonances that infiltrate our consciousness at particular moments. Gerty herself is a parody of the romantic heroine, one who “ completely [represses] all sexual desires and awareness of her own physical being…she must be an object.” Gerty, however, is aware of her sexual desires and

cannot keep her fantasies pure, imagining that Bloom's " hands and face were working and a tremor went over her." She is further aware that she is being watched, and seems to enjoy being seen, deliberately "[revealing] all her graceful beautifully shaped legs" to Bloom. This awareness of her sexual power is at odds with the stereotype of this sort of heroine, and as such, Gerty becomes the antitheses of the romantic heroine. Parody also serves to critique the censorship debate. The idea that young women were vulnerable to any moral deviance in works of fiction was particularly highlighted by the sensational novel outrage of the nineteenth century. These " sensational" novels were considered dangerous because they " made readers read with their bodies." Gerty is a virgin who is aware of her own sexuality because she reads – exactly what advocates against sensational novels feared. Joyce's ironic twist, however, is that Gerty read a romance novel with a typically asexual heroine, rather than " sensational" fiction, seemingly mocking the whole censorship debate. Perhaps Joyce is critiquing the readiness with which people vilify literature in order to create a scapegoat for societal problems. The issues facing Irish society during Joyce's time are revealed through the virgin/whore dichotomy. On one hand, Irish Catholicism postulated the doctrine of Mary-olatry, but on the other, Ireland had a sizeable population of prostitutes. In The Lamplighter, Gertrude models herself after the Virgin Mary. Likewise, in the " Nausicaa" episode of Ulysses, Gerty tries to see herself in this light, as the " refuge of sinners…comfortress of the afflicted" – allusions to the Holy Virgin. However, her sexual awareness means she must fail as this figure. The juxtaposition between Gerty's sexuality and the Virgin Mary's takes on a comic element as the discrepancy between Gerty's vision of herself and what she really is

becomes wider. Joyce’s parody of the would-be virgin seems to allude to the hypocrisy of societal attitudes at the time. The doctrine of Mary-olatry also suggests transubstantiation. It is thus interesting that Gerty’s stockings are a diaphanous object, recalling the motif of the diaphane that permeates previous episodes in Ulysses. Aristotle spoke of the diaphane as a medium that enables things to show their actual selves only in light, begging the question of where the source of the light is located. This parallels the question of the where the source of creativity – and particularly the creation of language – can be found. This question is explored through parody, as it highlights the relationship between language and consciousness. This is firstly considered through the construction of character-specific discourses. Gerty may be a typical example of “ winsome Irish girlhood,” but that is because she is a composite of the discourses that construct the ideal Irish female. The parody occurs through Joyce’s subversion of this ideal construct, wherein Gerty appears to be deluding herself into believing that she is this ideal. There are several images in the episode that suggest Gerty’s narcissistic delusions, including her placement, like Narcissus, near “ the little pool by the rock,” and her bedroom mirror, in front of which she “[smiles] at the lovely reflection which the mirror gave back to her!” Gerty appears to be deliberately constructing this image of herself, perhaps in order to mask her insecurities about her role as a woman, and it is thus significant that we discover that she is lame, as we realise that she is not the ideal female form she makes herself out to be. Gerty thinks of Bloom in terms of masculine stereotypes: “ her dreamhusband…[who] would embrace her gently, like a real man, crushing her soft body to him.” She is portrayed as a “ typical” woman, who imagines the possibilities of marriage and

children, whilst Bloom is the “ typical” man, who sees Gerty merely as an object of desire. In this sense, Bloom’s narrative is very much part of his character. This raises the question of linguistic determination, and of whether we can think outside of our own language. Bloom acknowledges this question when he describes his erotic communication with Gerty as “ a kind of language between us.” He is aware that something has taken place, and wonders whether or not that is a language. Joyce seems to be engaging with those points of nexus between thought and language, and makes the reader question whether it is possible to document them. The two voices in this episode create an intratextual parody. Gerty is observing Bloom as he observes her, and as such, the characters function simultaneously as both the representor and the object of representation. Bakhtin claims that this dialogical relationship can be regarded as a parodic relationship, stating that “ in parodic discourse two styles, two ‘ languages’ come together…the language being parodied…and the language that parodies.” Likewise, the two voices of Gerty and Bloom critique and comment on each other. The unreliability of Gerty’s account of what happened between herself and Bloom is highlighted by the juxtaposition of Bloom’s discourse against her own. Gerty romanticises her physicality, and subsequently Bloom’s reaction to it, claiming that “ his eyes burned into her as thought they would…read her very soul.” This stands in direct contrast to Bloom’s matter-of-fact, coarse reaction, “ I saw your. I saw all. Lord!” and after masturbating, “ for this relief much thanks.” At one time, both discourses act as parodies of the other. Bloom appears preoccupied with the coarse physicality of females, thinking about them in terms of menstruation, orgasms, and their bodies, and in this manner enables us to laugh at Gerty’s romantic view of her physicality while

simultaneously critiquing her constructed discourse. Indeed, Bakhtin cites critique through laughter as the first foundation of novelistic discourse, because “ these parodic-travestying forms…destroyed the homogenising power of myth over language.” In these two episodes, parody serves to critique the values of Joyce’s society both present and past, and to explore the different facets of language. In “ Cyclops”, parody functions specifically as a critique of the grand narrative, and is used to subvert existing structures and hierarchies. Joyce parodies aspects of popular culture in “ Nausicaa” to highlight the relationship between language and consciousness, and to reveal the manner in which discourses are constructed and interact with each other. SourcesBakhtin, M. Rabelais and His World (trans. H. Iswelolsky). Indiana UP, Bloomington, 1984Bakhtin, M. “ The Pre-history of Novelistic Discourse”, from The Dialogic Imagination: Four EssaysBennett, A and Royle, N. An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory: Key Critical Concepts. London: Prentice Hall, 1995Bullocks, A and Stallybrass, O. The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought. London: Fontana/Collins, 1977Cohen, L. “ Sensation Fiction of the Nineteenth Century”, from http://caxton. stockton. edu/ulysses/disc. msg 12/10/2002, accessed 29/5/04Devlin, K. “ The Romance Heroine Exposed: Nausicaa and The Lamplighter.” James Joyce Quarterly, 22. 4 (1985)Goldman, A. The Joyce Paradox. Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, London, 1966Henke, S. James Joyce and the Politics of Desire. Routledge, London, 1990Joyce, J. Ulysses. Penguin Classics, London, 2000 (ed. Declan Kiberd)Leckie, B. “ Reading Bodies, Reading Nerves.” James Joyce Quarterly, 34. 1-2 (1996)Newman, R. Pedagogy, Praxis, Ulysses. University of Michigan Press, Michigan, 1996Parrinder, P. James Joyce.

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