

# James joyce and the national commodity



In Anne McLintock's *Imperial Leather*, she claims that women are the earth that is to be discovered, entered, named, and above all, owned. In the work of James Joyce, particularly *Ulysses* and *Dubliners*, he explores women who fit into McLintock's description: women as commodities. It is not merely individual females who have been commodified, often sexually, but it is also Ireland. The very earth and motherland of Joyce's characters, she too is subject to ownership and export. Possessing a distinct place in the colonial sphere, Ireland is portrayed by Joyce to be the national woman who is sold through her people and her material goods, whilst simultaneously partaking in the business of buying other nations. The very deepness with which people, object and nation are embedded into commodity culture raises questions of whether or not anything is truly untouched by consumerism in modern times, and ultimately, questions of authenticity. Joyce places women into the Marxist class of commodity by portraying them in his novels as manifestations of popular culture that can be advertised, commodified, bought or sold. In *Ulysses*, the episode 'Calypso' subtly presents advertising with its increased undertones of marketable sexuality, turning Leopold Bloom's daughter Milly, into an object of popular culture. In the letter she writes home, she thanks them for her new bathing suit: 'everyone says I'm quite the belle in my new tam...I am getting on swimming in the photo business now'. There is an implicit link between her improved aesthetic and her business success, particularly in an industry that resonates with emphasizing women's sexuality, pin-up girls, and even pornography. Milly is now aware of her body's ability to improve 'biz' (p. 63), as she is now 'vain: very' (p. 64). Standing in contrast to the prostitutes scattered across *Ulysses*, the most blatant embodiments of sexual commodities, Milly is a young girl,

only 'fifteen yesterday' (p. 64). Commodification is thus insinuated to occur from a young age, and this notion is perpetuated through Gerty in the 'Nausicaa' episode. Gerty is quantified in monetary terms as a 'sterling good daughter...with a little heart worth its weight in gold' (p. 339). She is constructed of the very product that plays such a key role in global trade, 'gold'. Furthermore she wonders why 'you couldn't eat something poetical like violets or roses' (p. 337), revealing a desire to ingest a diet of romantic clichés that only reiterates herself as a product of consumerism. Gerty becomes, after all, a sexual object for Bloom and the focus of his voyeuristic masturbation in public. She is aware of his gaze and seemingly embraces it, 'lifting her skirt but just enough...to draw attention on the account of the gentleman opposite looking' (p. 340). The act is made only more perverse by the fact that Gerty is around the same age as Milly, indicating the blurred boundaries of acceptable female objectification. If the women and girls of Ireland can be commodified, it is then unsurprising that Ireland as a nation, especially considering its struggle against the British Empire, could be seen by Joyce as the ultimate case of a woman bought and sold. In the short story 'Two Gallants' from *Dubliners*, the feminized harp that Lenehan and Corley pass is a representation of Ireland. The harp, in the hands of her male harpist was 'heedless that her coverings had fallen about her knees, seemed wearily alike of the eyes of strangers and of her master's hands' Ireland is unashamed, 'heedless' that she is naked, yet glances 'wearily' and those who listen to her music under the command of another. There is a tone of resignation surrounding her song. The harpist and harp, then, become allegorical for Ireland under the British Empire in the eyes of the world who look on as the two perform in hopes of money. These links are made more

explicit through the choice of song ‘ Silent, O Moyle’, whose artist Thomas Moore celebrated the personification of harp as Ireland in his other works (p. xx). The Irish nation is the motherland of Joyce and the inhabitants of his novels, presented as a mother in ‘ Eumeus’ of Ulysses by the political Parnell: ‘ Ireland, Parnell said, could not spare a single one of her sons’ (p. 595). With the image of Ireland established as that of woman and a mother, Joyce explores Parnell’s statement by showing that while she ‘ could not spare a single one of her sons’; Ireland seemed able to spare many of her daughters. Joyce presents the daughters of the motherland as integral components of what assembles the Irish country. McLintock emphasizes that women are typically constructed as the symbolic bearers of the nation, and appropriately in Joyce’s works, their commodification represents the objectification and slow disintegration of Ireland. Gerty is ‘ as fair a specimen of winsome Irish girlhood as once could wish to see’ (p. 333), the epitome of an untouched, thriving young Ireland. However, through becoming the sexual target of Bloom’s public masturbation, Gerty and the pure vision she represents becomes corrupted and debased. Objectification, then, undermines the foundations of a nation. Gerty’s withered leg becomes a symptom of this, the disabling factor in an otherwise pure girlish specimen: ‘ Mr. Bloom watched her as she limped away’ (p. 351). Her disability suggests a limping Ireland, declining under British rule, held back as its products and people are commodified. In Dubliners, the namesake of the short story ‘ Eveline’ also represents the selling of Ireland and her people (specifically her women) as a way of weakening the country. Eveline chooses ‘ to leave her home’ (p. 25), Dublin, in favour of following her lover Frank ‘ to be his wife and to live with him in Buenos Ayres where he had a home waiting for her’

(p. 27). The Irish home is rejected in favour of the far and exotic, 'Buenos Ayres', but there also exists undertones of a sinister industry that indicates a deep-rooted problem in the arena of human labour. Buenos Aires had an international reputation as a centre for the import of Irish females who would be subject to sexual exploitation. So while Eveline's ultimate choice of rejecting Frank, 'her eyes gave him no sign of love or farewell or recognition' (p. 29), may indicate that she avoided becoming a victim of human trafficking, it remains that she, and Ireland, was vulnerable to the industry. Eveline represents all the Irish women who weakened, tarnished, and highlighted the struggle of their country by being victim of the white slave trade. However, Ulysses shows that it is not simply the trade of people that can build or break a nation, but also that of its material goods that equally present the land. In Ulysses, Joyce depicts this in a way that connects the sale of Ireland's produce with her painful memories of the 1840s Great Famine, and subsequently to her place in the British Empire. As Stephen Dedalus walks the streets in 'Lestrygonians', he sees a 'divided drove of branded cattle' (p. 94) and thinks 'for Liverpool probably. Roast beef for old England. They buy up all the juicy ones' (p. 94). The cattle are 'branded' by fire in a literal sense, but also figuratively as products from the brand of Ireland. Their explicit export to 'old England' in Dedalus' head resonates with a debated issue from the Famine: the continued export of Irish cattle to England, even after the potato blight had destroyed the crops and left the Irish starving. The cattle trade thus exemplifies how commodities were crucial in making or breaking a nation – in this case, it contributed to the struggles following the ruined food sources. The potato blight is alluded to more explicitly in a fight during 'Circe' between Bloom and the prostitute

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Zoe for a potato. ' She puts the potato greedily in her pocket' (p. 450) and later, as Bloom asks for it back, he justifies his plea by claiming ' it is nothing, but still a relic of poor mamma' (p. 518). The potato as a symbol of both the Irish motherland and the fight for food during the famine is reiterated here, as is the endearing sentiment behind ' poor mamma' Ireland. The commodities of Ireland have tired her out, and in the pitiful tone through ' poor mamma', all at once it is obvious that the potato has become a ' relic', a symbol reflecting its declining country. The parallels of commodity to female sexuality are drawn again as Zoe reveals ' her bare thigh and unrolls the potato from the top of her stocking' (p. 518). The physical proximity of the staple food to the apex of Zoe's thighs, as well as the image of its slow withdrawal, is not unlike how the export of potatoes or any Irish good constitutes a loss to the woman, the motherland, from whence it came. Nevertheless, how authentic is Ireland in Joyce's work as a victim of consumerism and the commodity trade? While the commodification of Ireland, her products and her people remains, Joyce undermines it through the demonstration of Ireland's own imperialist role. Products from other British colonies are scattered throughout Ulysses as integral parts of the Irish's daily lives. The Irish domestic necessity of ' tea' is referred to over seventy five times in the course of the novel, a good imported from the East that also echoes a mastery of English tradition. The pantry of the Blooms', surveyed in the episode ' Ithaca', is full of imported goods from elsewhere in the empire. On the middle shelf alone one could find ' soluble coca, five ounces of Anne Lynch's choice tea at 2/- per lb.... the best crystallised lump sugar, two onions, one the larger, Spanish, entire, the other, smaller, Irish, bisected with augmented surface and more redolent' (p. 628). There is '

cocoa' from Africa, 'tea' from the East, and 'crystallised sugar' from the Caribbean, all national slaves and commodities of the British Empire. Even in its nationalist struggle, Joyce portrays Ireland playing the imperialist game, and consequently is not only victim, but also conqueror alongside the British by nourishing the empire through economic means. In the same way that the commodification of Ireland hinders her, the same dilemma for other colonies builds her up again. The onions demonstrate the difference between independence and colonisation, with the Spanish onion 'entire' and 'larger', in contrast to a 'bisected' Irish onion with an 'augmented surface', figuratively the surface of the country augmented under foreign power. Joyce juxtaposes the feeble, commodified Ireland with the abundance and richness of the imported goods, but simultaneously highlights that while being sold is negative in Ireland herself, she is actually built through commodities bought from other subjugated nations. Joyce has thus shown commodities to be embedded within themselves. In 'Nausicaa', Bloom objectifies Gerty sexually, and simultaneously himself as he imagines his image: he is the 'prize mystery man on the beach' (p. 358), with eyes that could 'read her very soul' (p. 342). Bloom constructs an archetypal heartthrob version of himself as imagined through the eyes of Gerty. There are several levels of objectification at play here, through packaging both Gerty and Bloom into ideal figures of romance, but also in the way Bloom imagines this. The narrative of 'Nausicaa', easily confused with that of popular literary 'smut', builds on romantic and poetic clichés: 'the summer evening had begun to fold the world in its mysterious embrace' (p. 331). However, this is narrated through what Bloom believes Gerty to perceive, therefore revealing that even Bloom's mind and view is filtered through popular culture. All this is

further embedded within an episode that can be referred to as 'Nausicaa', taken from a pre-existing literary commodity, Homer's The Odyssey and placed into Ulysses, Joyce's work that alludes to it. Ulysses is then aware of itself as literary commodity, and becomes part of a commodity cycle that is also evident in Joyce's work. Ireland is a commodified nation built from the commodities of others, never truly a victim because it benefits from the same predicament it suffers from. As 'Nausicaa' revealed, even the narratives of Joyce's work can be questioned as being part of a consumer culture cycle, one that blurs the boundaries of whether the stories and perceptions are real or unreal. Joyce ultimately intimates that consumer and commodity culture are now so embedded in modern nations and modern lives that commodity has eroded authenticity.