

# Free essay about ulysses and the nightmare of history

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When James Joyce was talking to a potential publisher of *Dubliners*, he thought it would turn out to be just one section of Ireland's moral history. *Ulysses* turned out to be much the same, in the form of a huge magnification of the ongoing argument that contains the frustrations of a broken heart and the awful clarity with which this Irish writer remembered, from the depths of exile, the specifics of a face that he could not forget. In *Ulysses*, what you get is some historical fiction showing the average lives of average *Dubliners* thrown in high relief against the scenery of the city as it stood in 1904. His images come from memory, newspapers, and letters from home, as all of those impressions were weaved into that tumultuous quilt. He also decorated his *Iliad* with the flotsam and jetsam of Irish history, folklore, mythos and politics of the day. *Ulysses* just has a map of the Emerald Isle all over it. The "nightmare of history," in other words, is much the same as Sartre's vision of hell: it simply consists of other people.

In *Finnegan's Wake*, Joyce sarcastically sold the "cultic twalette," a semi-pathetic grasp among the Irish to revert to the days of their Celtic glory. This movement was in its early throes when Joyce was starting to find his niche in the literary world of Dublin. The generation of writers who came right before Joyce were inspired by their consciousness of that Celtic Ireland, and that awareness was alive and well for Joyce's contemporaries as well. In spite of his best intentions, this awareness did not leave Joyce alone by any means. Even though Joyce kept a distantly dark viewpoint on the topic, he never allowed his attention to veer away from it. When Joyce sardonically introduces the idealization of the Celtic past as the bane of that off-putting Englishman, Haines, he shows that his nightmare comes from his conscious

realization that Irish tradition is an inescapable element of his persona and even his destiny. Haines is investigating Irish myth in Dublin, but neither one of his hosts appears to share his passions. Haines even tries to speak Gaelic with the ignorant milkmaid; ironically, she thinks that he might be speaking French. Soon, he finds that Buck Mulligan is making fun of him, trying to sell his own modern Irish humor as mock myth from the past: “Can you recall, brother, is mother Grogan’s tea and water pot spoken of in the Mabinogion or is it in the Upanishads?” (13).

While Haines claims to admire Stephen’s modern form of wit, he is ultimately loyal to the lore of the Celts, to the point that when Stephen is analyzing Hamlet, as promised, Haines is searching for Hyde’s Lovesongs of Connacht at the bookstores. As the author, Joyce keeps the privilege for a last jab, which comes with the temporary appearance of an English student in the Lying-in Hospital to set up a meeting with Mulligan. At this point, the Gothic style works well as Joyce nails Haines: “He had a portfolio full of Celtic literature in one hand, in the other a phial marked Poison” (412). This juxtaposition shows some of the absurdity that accompanies analyzing literature rather than simply inhabiting it for a short while. The tools of analysis often rob of a text of its mystery, leaving it instead quivering under the sharp gaze of the objective analyst.

Haines’ interest in the Celtic is only magnified by the citizen’s obsessions in the Irish. The Paul Bunyan-like one-eyed antagonist resides in a hallucinatory universe of Irish mythology, in a fugue broken only by bitter memories that his native homeland is under the irony of siege from an inferior group. His own Ireland goes back to the very dawn of human history. Its flag is older

than any symbol crusted with a harp: “ the oldest flag afloat, three crowns on a blue field, the three sons of Milesius” (328). In contrast, Leopold Bloom is definitely one of the new Irish who swear by the harp: “ Only the harp. Lovely gold glowering light” (271). The citizen sharply denounces this ostensible heresy: “ none of your Henry Tudor’s harps, no” (328). The mythical founding of the Emerald Isle under the Celts by the sons of Milesius is perhaps the foundation of the citizen’s patriotism. However, Stephen only gives it a passing mention during his recovery from his binge in the hospital: “ Return, return, Clan Milly: forget me not, O Milesian” (393).

While the reader finds his way through the chapter on the Cyclops, the echoing voice of the citizens often finds dissent from others, one of which is Bloom’s voice of reason. The distant narrator constantly scorns the citizens from the safe venue of his own thoughts, while anecdotes of ironic gigantism enter to ridicule the exaggerated statements of the citizen. The narrator’s sotto voce here shows nothing but contempt, while the epic wanderings echo loudly with a mockery for such topics as the revival of the Gaelic language, the “ ranns of ancient Celtic bards” (312), the ancient Celtic arts, and the tribal traditions. Each gesticulation from the superpatriot, whether it is his manipulation of the Jacobs biscuit tin to the drinking of his pint, receives a grandiose augmentation. His pocket handkerchief swells into a “ much-treasured and intricately embroidered ancient Irish facecloth attributed to Manus Tomatach og Macdonogh” (331), while his support for the Irish language as well as the Gaelic League is undone by the narrator: “ one night I went in with a fellow into one of their musical evenings and there was a fellow with a Ballyhooly blue ribbon badge spiffing out of him in Irish and a

lot of colleen bawns going about

with temperance beverages” (311). Long after the afternoon time at Bernard Kiernan’s, the story keeps on making small of the citizen in Ulyssesi. His preference for continuing ancient Celtic sports rather than taking part in such ambiguous English games as tennis evokes such Irish funeral sports as those in which “ Tom Rochford, winner in athlete’s singlet and breeches, arrives at the head of the national hurdle handicap and leaps into the void. He is followed by a race of runners and leapers” (598). While Homer only required one No-man to gain the scale of Polyphemus, Joyce uses a whole crowd of naysayers to shout down the citizen’s chauvinism.

As the day goes on, Bloom’s nation and its tales preoccupy him, but he also feels a desire to run away to the Levant, that fertile crescent that has, for him, roots that run deep. Stephen, in contrast, feels confined by his roots as a native Irishman; again, the “ nightmare of history” rears its head as Stephen feels he can never escape his national identity. He feels as helpless, in important ways, as his Celtic ancestors felt when the Norman Conqueror first arrived on their shores. This means that he feels just as trapped as they felt when their independence vanished. As he strolls down Sandymount Strand, he thinks of the Viking ships that landed to invade dublin, as well as the whales that were stranded on land in 1131, as well as the years in which the Liffey froze over. He imagines the lives of his ancestors: “ from the starving cagework city a horde of jerkined dwarfs, my people, with flayers’ knives, running, scaling, hacking in green blubbery whalemat. Famine, plague and slaughters” (45). To the citizen, his ancestors are heroes, titans. Stephen sees his ancestors as diminutive dwarves. For Stephen, to whom

history represents a nightmare, considerable personal association exists between the tumultuous centuries of the history of the Emerald Isle and the events that mark his own life. Mulligan is the enemy and the usurper, connected with the duplicity and treachery that are themes in the history of Ireland. While he walks down the strand, the image of Buck's waistcoat and his ridicule of Stephen's own fear of dogs makes his mind view history ironically: " Pretenders: live their lives. The Bruce's brother, Thomas Fitzgerald, silken knight, Percy Warbeck, York's false scion, in breeches of silk of whiterose ivory, wonder of a dayAll king's sons. Paradise of pretenders then and now" (45). Celtic history happens over and over again the lives of its particular people, and Mulligan finds implication in the dark deeds of pretenders and usurpers. Speaking on his very own voice, Joyce opens a list of Irish heroes which starts out nicely enough but then falls into absurdity, as he intersperses real heroes with mock figures and even some traitors. While on the beach, Stephen thinks of the revolt of Thomas Fitzgerald against King Henry VIII in 1534. However, he also thinks of the doings of the Reverend Hugh C. Love and Ned Lambert later that day. They go to the remains of St. Mary's, where Fitzgerald had brought together his Council of State to clarify his intentions against the king. The reverend appears to be penning a book about the revolution, while Lambert shows him the historic place. Love's interest in Celtic history parallels that of Haines, and Joyce later merges the two. Because both view the Irish identity as something to be clinically analyzed, rather than simply absorbed, they miss out in crucial ways on the power of the worldview. Analyzing a way of thinking is at times like looking at pencil shavings and using their shape to form the words that

had been written by the pencil before. It is extremely difficult to move with precision from those assumptions to an actual interpretation, and so it is tough for Haines and Love to really understand the Irish worldview. If you look at Irish history from the Act of Union on, it appears to be a listing of the woe's of the nation. The purpose of *Ulysses* is to catalogue those tragedies for the reader. It is Charles Stewart Parnell, whose ghostly apparition haunts the first chapter of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, who is the primary aspect of the last century. The speculation that Parnell is not dead but instead waits for his chance to come back and lead the Irish evokes the Arthurian legends but brings them much closer to the present. This almost superstitious take on Irish history shows at once how simple and how passionate the Irish notion of history often is. One almost hopes for a chance, in far off years, to restore that Gaelic glory, to allow the Emerald Isle to roll back to its ancient days of goodness. It is a difference between the Irish worldview and that of the English one that the Irish still await that idealistic past. While King Arthur still is a part of British culture, he is more of a mascot than an actual figure of hope. The mythical aspects of that goodness, though, in Irish culture, render it little more than mere nostalgia. The impossibility of escaping that nostalgia is what makes history a nightmare, for Stephen and for others. The irony is that there is no way out from this illusion. One of the differences, perhaps, between the English and Irish worldviews creates an incompatibility between pragmatism and idealism. The “stiff upper lip” of the English way and the passionate idealism of the Irish way have captured the Irish spirit and hold it captive, further lending to the nightmare to which Stephen refers in *Ulysses*. Until this

incompatibility finds resolution, it is unlikely that the Irish will find comfort in their current political and socioeconomic status.

## **Works Cited**

Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. New York: Vintage Books, c1990.