

# Burlesque and diegetic trolling: deciphering the cyclops' erratic narrative



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The “ Eye,” “ Aye,” and “ I’s” have it.

Indeed, the ‘ Cyclops’ episode is recognizable at a glance. Following The ‘ Sirens’ melodic fugue, the twelfth chapter sees a swift change, both in tone and form. The narrative shifts to a mysteriously verbose I-narrator, and relates Leopold Bloom’s encounter with the confrontational Citizen. This comes about halfway through James Joyce’s “ Flaneur Epic,” and he writes one of the most recognizable parallel to its’ Homeric counterpart. When Odysseus lands on the island of cyclops, he and his men are trapped in a cave by Polyphemus. The ‘ Cyclops’ cannibalizes a couple of men each day. In order to outwit the giant, the hero gets Polyphemus drunks, and tells him his name is “ No Man,” before plunging a stake into his eye. This causes the monster to cry incoherently, blaming “ No Man,” which is met with derision. His kin does not understand. His blindness enables Odysseus and his men to escape the cave by strapping themselves to the sheep. He then foolishly proclaims his name as he sails away, leading Polyphemus to pray for father Poseidon to curse the boasting Odysseus. Bloom and The citizen are the Joycean Odysseus and Polyphemus, and their confrontation echoes the traditional Epic. The unnamed narrator is crucial to the reading of the chapter. The “ I” presence soon establishes authorial intent by narrowing the perspective to one person, one eye on the scene. The authority of the narrator slowly unravels with a deluge of parodic interjections and the multiplying characters serving as eyewitnesses. In the ‘ Cyclops’ episode, the juxtaposition of eloquent prose and colloquial banter of the characters, highlight Joyce’s struggles with the Irish Nationalist rhetoric during this period of Irish Cultural Revival. The political undertones are all the more

apparent with the dense citizen, continuously sprouting Nationalistic ideas. The choice of parodic tone does not merely emphasize the flaws in blind Nationalist ideology, but also serves both as an incredibly self-aware exercise in the limitations of narrative authority.

The narration in ' Cyclops' episode begins with the commanding voice of the anonymous I-Narrator, only to soon delve into parody as he is disrupted over thirty times by an unknown parodist. The repetition of the " Eye" homophones or the narrator's anonymity, hinting to the ' No Man' identity, is enough to immediately associate this episode to the Odyssean encounter with the Cyclops Polyphemus. This parallelism is noticeable at a glance, well before the introduction of the citizen and Leopold Bloom. This cues the reading of the chapter. In essence, it insinuates a lesser relevance of the events in comparison to the stylistic prose of the episode. The story of ' No Man' outwitting a giant is in the subtext rather than the plot. The mocking interruptions, although varying in style, are not attributed to any one voice, and for the purposes of this study, we will accredit these passages to a singular parodist. The reader is increasingly distanced as the central " I" voice loses its narrative authority with each new intrusion. Joyce almost immediately calls attention to the physical presence of this new anonymous narrator, and his vulnerability. The episode begins with him recounting how a " bloody sweep" almost poked his eye out with a broom. This not only makes a parallel with the mythical monster, but also foreshadows the myopic theme. For the most part, the narrator seems to follow a naturalist dialogue, although often colored with vulgar and bitter remarks. His straightforwardness is a stark contrast to the often hyperbolic parodist,

which offers many perceptions, all the while never giving a truly well rounded vision of the same moment. The choice to stylistically parody narrative conventions is an interesting one, and is an essential starting point to analyze the authorial intent. The hyperbolic passages often describe the events in an epic manner, as is illustrated by the parodist first interruption, painting an exaggerated portrait of Dublin, as the narrator heads to the bar:

In Inisfail the fair there lies a land, the land of holy Michan. There rises a watchtower beheld of men afar. There sleep the mighty dead as in life they slept, warriors and princes of high renown. (12. 378. 31)

The description of an ancient mythical land inhabited by mighty warriors and princes is an abrupt departure from the narrator's preceding paragraph. The language is reminiscent of that of the Irish Literary Revival movement, which romanticized Celtic culture. "Inisfail" was the name given to Ireland, by the godlike race known as the 'Tuatha Dé Danaan' and has appeared in 19th Century revivalist poetry. These interpolations clue the reader to the parallels with the homeric tale. Bloom's "knockmedown cigar," is the modern Odyssean stake, the Citizen is introduced with many references to caves, echoing the lair of Polyphemus. The following parodic invasions ridicule varying styles. Their juxtaposition with the narrator's colloquial account of the same moment emphasize the mocking tone. In a parodic passage of medicinal jargon, Leopold Bloom's scientific explanation is interrupted by the narrator, who describes it as "he starts with his jawbreakers about phenomenon and science and this phenomenon and the other phenomenon." (12. 394. 1). The parodist follows this annoyed recount with the ceremonial "The distinguished scientist Herr Professor Luitpold <https://assignbuster.com/burlesque-and-diegetic-trolling-deciphering-the-cyclops-erratic-narrative/>

Blumenduft,"(12. 394. 4) and proceeds to mock Bloom's explanation through highly technical language. The eclectic uses of language is prompted by seemingly insignificant details, which introduce new perceptions, all of which disregard what has been said previously. They cause confusion, misinterpretation and contradictions in the narrative. Leopold Bloom is both an " Old lardyface" and " the distinguished phenomenologist". He can be a viewed through antisemitic lenses as a penny-pinching jew or a mythical hero. The allusions to the source material is some of the most explicit in Joyce's epic, however, the deluge of lengthy lexical lists interjected by the parodist, the multitude of stylistic voices and contradicting depictions of the central figure, seem to render the plot moot. The tone is that of a mock epic, yet Joyce is not mocking the homeric tale. He is using the structure of the Odyssey as a vehicle for various stylistic and thematic parody.

' Cyclops' subverts the instruments used by the Irish Revivalists to spread their message, by shedding light on their inherent shortcomings. The three cultural media pillars that were intended to fuel a sense of Irish nationhood were the newspapers, Celtic ballads and Theatre. In the late 18th and beginning of the 19th Century, budding nationalist groups used newspaper distribution and ballads to heighten the nation's awareness of their own national history. While ' Aeolus' takes place in a newspaper office, ' Cyclops' is chock-full of print-culture references from articles taken out of real periodicals to the mention of the citizen's " paraphernalia papers". The news saturated episode continues the pattern of parodying interpolations, here mocking the biased content of the media, such as a satirized British Imperialist piece read by the citizen:

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—A delegation of the chief cotton magnates of Manchester was presented yesterday to His Majesty the Alaki of Abeakuta by Gold Stick in Waiting, Lord Walkup of Walkup on Eggs, to tender to His Majesty the heartfelt thanks of British traders for the facilities afforded them in his dominions. (12. )

Similarly to the homeric plot, the content of these mimicked 'journalistic' articles, although meaningful and certainly humorous, are also somewhat secondary to the main argument. It is the swarm of periodicals in circulation and their consumption that is made farcical. Just as the plethora of stylistic voices contribute to this notion that there is no one objective perception of the events, the sheer volume of papers in circulation adds to the conflicting messages influencing the readers. Adding to the confusion brought on by the number of newspapers, Joyce also includes the ceremonial or performative aspect surrounding their consumption. Pubs were a well known meeting place for Irish Nationalists to share their ideas. The public reading of newspaper articles enabled the masses to hear the messages of unifying Ireland, and to reclaim their identity after a long period of British colonialism. This performance aspect is deeply ingrained in the oral tradition of ballads, which have long been the sole method of insuring history would not be forgotten. Tales of legendary races who created Ireland and the occult were usually the themes of these musical fables, and with time they developed into political ballads. The theatre truly entered the equation later in the century, and seriously cemented its role in this Revival when the Lady Gregory, W. B. Yeats and Edward Martin opened the Abbey Theatre in 1904. The Irish Literary Revival had been about promoting a National consciousness, breaking with British imperialism for good, and striving for

new beginnings with a free Irish State. Two recurring stereotypes of Irishmen were considered symbols to reclaim in order to disassociate with with colonial hangups. The first was the loathsome “ Stage-Irishman”, depicted as a cowardly drunk, and the second was the docile passive woman. Ireland, historically attributed to this feminine image was prevalent due to its Celtic mythology, occult past and goddess symbolism. The revivalists took these images and reinvented them to suit a budding Nation in need of rediscovering its identity after centuries of colonialism. These figures transformed the coward Irishman into a young soldier or artist, ready to fight for its country, and the weak female into a powerful mother figure reminiscent of old Irish traditions, personifying Ireland as a Motherland. Cathleen Ni Houlihan, the most well-known play with patriotic themes of the Literary Revival, was written by W. B Yeats and Lady Gregory. They promoted an embodiment of Ireland, as a frail woman after having her “ four green fields” usurped, and luring a young man into sacrificing his life to retrieve them for her. The citizen’s calls for action “ And they will come again and with a vengeance, no cravens, the sons of Granuaile, the champions of Kathleen Ni Houlihan,”(12. 428. 12) reflects this internalized militant discourse. ‘ Cyclops’ plays with tradition of performance, and this episode is one of the most theatrical yet. The way the parodist and citizen construct these events in Irish history and the stage figures is melodramatic. While the narrator describes the citizen’s actions as laughable, he compares them to caricature of the Queen’s Theatre, which is an interesting juxtaposition to the Abbey’s highly functional style. Yeats was notorious for hating theatrics, believing overly ornate performances to lessen the power of the script. Joyce

sees the movement to be closer to British influences than they realize. The irony is laid down thick.

The Citizen, being a caricature of Irish Revivalism, serves to denounce its rhetoric and bigoted attitudes occasionally attached to it. The character is described as wearing a girdle adorned with sealstones engraved with "rude yet striking art the tribal images of many Irish heroes and heroines of antiquity," solidifying his romanticism of ancient Ireland, a common thread in Revivalist discourse. His bombastic attitude paired with the parodist's theatrical depiction of his character, seems to be closer to the characterization of Alexander Pope's mock epic "The Rape of the Lock" rather than that of Homer's "Odyssey". His singular minded nostalgia and xenophobia illustrate Joyce's own reservations with the movement, criticizing an ideology which could lead to further isolate Ireland. Ulysses is itself positioned during a transitional period for Irish National identity. Set in 1904, while Ireland was still under the rule of England, and this reality of Irish colonial experience is cause for great tensions, notably with the agrarian population. The book's publication in 1922 comes one year following the emergence of the Irish Free State. The citizen is a personification of militant Irish Nationalism, while Bloom takes a seemingly oppositional stance, leaning towards a more moderate solution to this question of 'Irishness'. Historically, the English have depicted Irishmen and women as morally bankrupt and politically incapable to justify their domination of the Ireland. The reality of Irish inequality, loss of Irish culture and Irish land was not new. It stemmed from generations of English colonialism. One of the primary motivations for this movement was the Great Potato Famine in the XIX Century, in which the



Gaelic speaking population dropped dramatically. The citizen makes this clear when he mentions the worst year of the famine:

They were driven out of house and home in the black 47. Their mudcabins and their shielings by the roadside were laid low by the batteringram and the Times rubbed its hands and told the whitelivered Saxons there would soon be as few Irish in Ireland as redskins in America. Even the Grand Turk sent us his piastres. But the Sassenach tried to starve the nation at home while the land was full of crops that the British hyenas bought and sold in Rio de Janeiro. (12. 427. 33)

Joyce draws many comparisons between Bloom and Charles Parnell, who had been an important political figure of the Irish Nationalist movement and lead the liberal Home Rule League. Parnell opposed the Fenian revolutionary politics. The citizen himself praises terrorist acts committed by the group, and loathes the tepid methods of the League, who reacted with boycotts to make their point. The citizens interestingly seeks to modernization through Irish independence. This nostalgic longing for ancient Ireland was a common thread in nationalist rhetoric. This antagonism between the brash citizen and protagonist, has often lead readers to sympathize with Bloom. Joyce's authorial intent seems quite clear on the first read, however, there is much more implied. Bloom's ambivalent identity is an exploration of the nuanced identity of Ireland after a long and complicated history with British Colonialism. The very idea of Irishness is clouded with ideas of National Identity that no longer exist in their primitive form. The citizen's absolutist perception of what he defines as a Nation, completely disregards anything that does not fit into his rationale. It seems easy to sympathize with Bloom's

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plight here. The antisemitism he is subjected to, by both the narrator and the citizen. He becomes the very symbol of British colonial victimization, and the Citizen, in what Joyce notices as a great irony in the Revivalist movement, becomes the very oppressor he loathes. Be that as it may, there is no unambiguous hero or villain here. Bloom, upset by the confrontation, does not act heroically. His simplistic universalism is parodied as a comparison to Christ. One of Joyce's greatest successes in the episode, is his understanding of the Citizen, at least in the historical sense. Joyce exposes this fragility and embraces the already present pluralism in Ireland. Leopold Bloom, being this mosaic of cultures, says it best when he states " A nation is the same people living in the same place... Or also living in different places".

When Joyce said, " I've put so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professor busy for centuries arguing over what I meant," he forgot the mention the legions of students, who will never get over the headache caused by trying to wrap their head around it. The ' Cyclops' episode, while not being quite as convoluted as others such as ' Circe', nevertheless functions on a multitude of levels. Polyphemus is a one eyed monster, who's barbarity is not tamed after being brutalized. In fact, it only amplified when he lost the narrow-sight he had. This is the underlying theme of the episode. Ireland loosing its identity is by no means an excuse to react as barbarically as their colonial oppressors. Joyce uses the narrative form to play with this idea of non-existing absolute truth. He comes to question the very nature of Literature, by turning it on its head, and in the process, revealing the machinations and artifices of the form. In order for introspection to be successful, Comedy seems to be uniquely qualified. It then seems natural for

Parody to become a vehicle for Art to question itself. “ No Man” or literary convention is impervious to joycean criticism, include himself.

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