

An extraordinary
ordinary man



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

As Leopold Bloom goes through the ordinary motions of a single day, he tries at times to add excitement and mystery to his life so that he may imagine himself as an extraordinary man with exceptional problems. Bloom does this so as to dispel the frightening notion that he is only an ordinary man with relatively commonplace troubles. If he can imagine that he is an extraordinary man in extraordinary circumstances, his tragedies gain a sense of importance, instead of being meaningless miseries that he must bear alone, in silence. Bloom's " affair" with Martha is just one of the ways that he attempts to add excitement to his life, so that he does not feel quite so ordinary. The fact that he has a forbidden secret lends excitement and mystery to Bloom's life, as does the actual act of keeping his affair hidden from everyone else. Bloom takes unnecessary pains to avoid having his communication with Martha discovered, indulging his fantasy that somebody might care about his life. Additionally, Bloom seems, at times, almost to revel in his sadness about Molly's affair, presumably because this allows him to imagine himself a tragic hero valiantly bearing his hard life. Bloom is unquestionably an ordinary man, and while his " affair" with Martha and his marriage difficulties are hardly extraordinary circumstances that nobody else has experienced, Bloom finds a kind of solace by creating a fantasy with himself as the central tragic figure. He revels in the secrecy surrounding his affair and his sadness about his marriage problems because they enable him to feel less like an ordinary man who is like every other man going through an ordinary day which is like every other day. This day in Leopold Bloom's life is, while unusually difficult due to the funeral and his wife's upcoming infidelity, not entirely out-of-the-ordinary. Although the circumstances of the day on which Ulysses takes place are slightly extraordinary, it is clear that

Bloom is an ordinary man dealing with a single day in his life. Bloom is obviously an intelligent man, as the reader may infer from his intellectual thoughts regarding everything from physics to parallax, and he certainly is aware of how ordinary he is. His desire to be extraordinary — to be an exciting, mysterious man — is what causes him to initiate his “ affair” with Martha. The affair, however, has thus far consisted solely of a few only indirectly suggestive letters. This is certainly no wild, passionate romance — the correspondence is hardly even incriminating. Bloom, however, has elevated the affair in his mind to heights far disproportionate to the reality of their communication. He takes unnecessary precautions to avoid being “ caught”: Corresponding under a pseudonym; using a P. O. Box; shredding the envelope his letter comes in and casting it into the river. The pseudonym of Henry Flower and the phony address serve to literally transform Bloom into another person — a person, presumably, who is able to do exciting things, things that Leopold Bloom can only dream of doing. The shredding of the letter is almost a spy tactic, as though Bloom fears that someone is trailing him, picking up evidence of any subversive acts he might be engaging in. Additionally, Bloom only removes Martha’s letter from his pocket when no one is around, perhaps imagining that someone might be watching him. The reality, of course, is that nobody would pay any heed to a man walking down the street reading a letter. Nobody would even wonder what was written on the page. Yet to Bloom, the letter-writing is thrilling in it’s surreptitiousness, and the possibilities that the correspondence seems to imply are incredibly exciting, because a real affair is such a forbidden act. The relationship with Martha possesses great importance to Bloom, as he can imagine himself a man in control of his own life, not an emasculated “

Poldy,” and he can feel some excitement in his life at the possibility of being caught. “ Go further next time. Naughty boy: punish” (64). Bloom revels in the excitement of doing something wrong, of being a “ naughty boy” for perhaps the first time ever, even if his actions are only “ wrong” in his own mind. In Chapter 11, Bloom has a fantasy that he is being followed, his correspondence tracked, and so he must cover the evidence of his communication with Martha. Through this fantasy, he lends excitement and importance to what is only, in reality, a relatively tame pseudo-relationship. While sitting in the tavern and responding to Martha’s letter, Bloom draws out the experience of doing something forbidden, taking the time to disguise his handwriting and blot over the impression on the blotting-pad. “ No, change that ee... Sign H. They like sad tail at end... Blot over the other so he can’t read. There. Right. Idea prize titbit. Something detective read off blottingpad” (229-30). Again, of course, the reality is that no-one would take any notice of an impression on a blotting-pad, take the time to decipher it, or even care about what was written if they could read it. However, by imagining not only that someone would attempt to discover his secrets but that they would care about them, Bloom is able to give himself a fleeting sense of being a mysterious, important man. All of the little fantasies and dramatics that Bloom engages in are ways for him to feel that he is important, special – more human. Another way that Bloom is able to make his life (in his mind, anyway) more exciting and out-of-the-ordinary than it really is is by reveling in the “ tragedy” that his marriage has become. While his marriage difficulties are not fantasies, as his affair with Martha is, they have a similar effect on Bloom. How he feels about the affair with Martha and how he feels about Molly’s affair with Boylan both serve to enhance Bloom’s

sense of being important, being alive. The affair with Martha makes Bloom feel like more of a man, and his sadness over Molly's affair makes Bloom feel like more of a human. His sadness over Molly is real; a real emotion that Bloom clings to so as not to lose his humanity. He can feel that he has chosen not to take action, like he can still make choices and is almost noble for choosing not to confront Boylan. Certainly, Bloom is a non-confrontational person, but perhaps he chooses to ignore the affair and let it go on because the sadness makes him feel truly, genuinely human. Molly's affair with Boylan adds a kind of perverse excitement to Bloom's life by making him the center of what is really a common man's tragedy. Bloom is forced to feel deep sadness, and almost begins to enjoy the feeling, because it makes him feel somewhat extraordinary. Deep sadness can make one feel special, important, as though no one can understand the suffering, and Bloom takes what seems, at times, to be a kind of pleasure in his misery. The emotions which he feels whenever he thinks of Molly make him feel more alive, and thus important. Although he makes an effort to banish any thoughts of Boylan that enter his head, Bloom is, subconsciously or not, encouraging the affair to some extent. Not only does he not make any effort to stop Molly, but he also buys her romance novels and lingerie. When Molly hides the letter from Boylan under her pillow, Bloom notices yet makes no comment about her secretiveness. Molly's attempt to hide the letter, however, is very much like Bloom's secretiveness about his correspondence with Martha. Perhaps Bloom enjoys, in a way, the degree of mystery that their respective affairs impart to their lives. Additionally, Bloom encourages Molly by not going home at the time when he knows Boylan will be visiting. Although he spends the day attempting to keep the thought of Molly's affair out of his head, he

also does absolutely nothing to stop it. Clearly, their marriage has not been going well since Rudy's death, so perhaps Bloom feels that he is not losing anything by Molly's affair, as he was not sleeping with her anyway, but is only gaining a degree of excitement in his life. Even though this excitement manifests itself, in Bloom, as misery, misery is better than absence of emotion. At times, misery may even feel better than happiness. Misery has a unique quality – it has the ability to make the sufferer feel real in a way that not even joy can match. Misery is a true emotion – undeniable, incapacitating in its strength. In Chapter 11, right after thinking about Molly, Bloom thinks “[y]et too much happy bores” (228). Although it seems bizarre, too much happiness can feel almost unreal, as though one is just waiting for something to go wrong. The advantage to misery is that there is always the certainty that one can feel no worse. Too much happiness can be boring – misery is far more exciting, for it is an emotion far deeper than happiness can ever be. Bloom's sadness about Molly's affair makes him aware that he still has the ability to feel great emotion. Perhaps this is the most emotion he has felt towards her in years, and his sadness about her loving another man is a way for him to reassert the love that he still has for her. Bloom's misery about Molly allows him to feel a kind of excitement of feeling that affirms his humanity and his ability to experience deep emotions, and it is for that reason that he does not take action to put an end to the affair. In *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom is faced with the greatest tragedy of the common man: being common. Although Bloom's situation is hardly what one would consider ideal, or even desirable, he is doing the best that he can to impart some shred of excitement or emotion into his otherwise commonplace life. For Bloom, the fantasy of an affair is better than having nothing to dream about, and

unhappiness is preferable to no feeling at all. The tragedy implicit in Ulysses comes from the reader's ability to identify so closely with Bloom, and the subsequent realization that we are all common men. Each of us must contend, alone, with the everyday tragedies of life, and each of us persists, in our own way, in the futile search to find some meaning in the hardships of life.