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“History...is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.”¹

Leopold Bloom and his Jewish Heritage

Fluxes of Power

Cultural studies seek to understand “the ways people do particular things” (“Cultural Studies”). More specifically, a branch of cultural studies looks at how people are portrayed in their “relation to power”. *Ulysses* is by no means silent on the subject of who has power—the British—and who does not—the Irish. However, a small minority population is left out of this preceding statement: the Jewish people—namely, Leopold Bloom. Throughout the novel, readers question Bloom’s purpose and his access to power despite being one of the only representations of the Jewish culture in *Ulysses*. This paper will seek to understand Bloom and his “Jewishness” in terms of his relation to power. Although all the characters in *Ulysses* are “subordinated” in some way, Bloom—being part Irish, part Jew, and no part Catholic—is subordinated primarily because of his Jewish “otherness” (Attridge 133).

To begin to understand Bloom’s “Jewishness”, we must first seek to understand Ireland’s stance towards the Jewish culture. During this time, the Catholic Church was “wary” (Reizbaum 105) of the Jewish establishment and the Jews were treated with much fear and distrust. *Ulysses* shows these overtones of distrust in several key sections.

¹ James Joyce, *Ulysses*

Although Bloom's roots point to his birth in "Ireland" (Joyce 272), he is treated as something other than normal because of his Jewish roots. This has a direct effect on Bloom and his power as an individual capable of making his own decisions. Mr. Deasy perhaps best describes this "catholic wariness" about the Jews in Nestor:

Mark my words, Mr. Dedalus...England is in the hands of the Jews...And they are the signs of a nation's decay. Wherever they gather they eat up the nation's vital strength. I have seen it coming these years. As sure as we are standing here the jew merchants are already at their work of destruction...Ireland...has the honour of being the only country which never persecuted the jews...And do you know why...Because she never let them in. (28-30)

In this view, Deasy equates the Jewish people with parasites, much like the previous discussion on foot and mouth disease (Reizbaum 103-104). This statement, coupled with Stephen's "smile" of acceptance becomes quite ironic when one considers that the Irish have something in common with the Jewish people: they are both a persecuted! Deasy's failure to recognize that the Jews are like the Irish in this respect lends the reader to assume that the standard Catholic belief of the day points to anti-Semitism of the Jewish culture. If this is true, we can see that this statement greatly limits Bloom's access to power in Irish society, namely by making it seem that the great majority of Ireland—the Catholics—are against him. Because of this view, Bloom is now treated with a great distrust that may, perhaps, never be overcome.

Being that the majority of Ireland—people of the Christian faith—now seem to have a distrust of the Jews, it seems only logical when the reader catches the first glimpse

that some “characters...reveal a heightened awareness of Bloom’s Jewishness” (Gibson 44). In Hades, several characters make it obvious that they are aware of Bloom’s Jewish “otherness” by unintentionally excluding him from conversations that he can partake in:

How do you do? Martin Cunningham said, raising his palm to his brow in salute. He doesn’t see us, Mr. Power said. Yes, he does. How do you do? Who, Mr. Dedalus asked.

Blazes Boylan, Mr. Power said. (76)

This conversation is one in which Bloom cannot partake in because of the impending cuckolding with Boylan and his wife, Molly. Therefore, Bloom falls into his role as the outsider looking in at people’s conversations. Another example of an awkward conversation that Bloom cannot partake in is when a child’s funeral procession passes by the car:

Sad, Martin Cunningham said. A child...

Poor little thing, Mr. Dedalus said....

In the midst of life, Martin Cunningham said... (79)

These lines seem to point towards the reminder of the death of Bloom’s son, Rudy, who died when he was a child. Again, this seems to be a conversation that Bloom cannot participate in because of his status as something other than the standard Catholic Irish. In these two scenes, readers are confronted by several awkward conversations that seem reveal this Jewish “awareness” by making Bloom seem as if he is not a whole part of Irish society. This affects his power of speech mostly, as we can see his lack of talking to reflect his mood of not belonging—and sure enough this Jew loves to play the archetypal exiled in several of the next chapters.

Cyclops is unique in the sense that it presents the reader with Citizen, a character who expresses anger toward cultures other than his own:

Swindling the peasants, says the citizen, and the poor of Ireland. We want no more strangers in our house...Our own fault. We let them come in. We brought them in. (265-266)

Citizen, like many Irish citizens, expresses a certain “antagonism” (Gibson 49) towards the Jews: they are “unacceptable in a modern society” (Reizbaum 105). Once Citizen learns of Bloom’s Jewish heritage, we see an all too common theme in literature: the Jewish people being persecuted. Bloom, however retorts Citizen with his reply on the Christian deity’s heritage:

And the savior was a jew and his father was a jew. Your God... Well, his uncle was a jew... Your God was a jew. Christ was a jew like me. (280)

In this example, Citizen’s attack of Bloom’s Jewishness *gave* Bloom power, rather than taking it away. The power given to him was a voice of individuality; a voice that spoke for what it believed. Unfortunately for the reader, this voice of Bloom’s individuality does not occur often enough in *Ulysses* to make a substantial impact on his character, or those around him.

Another example of Bloom’s Jewishness affecting his power in *Ulysses* comes in Circe. In this chapter, Bloom is “persecuted, falsely accused, in the parallel with Parnell” (Reizbaum 109):

[The Crier cries] (loudly) Whereas Leopold Bloom of no fixed abode is a wellknown dynamitard, forger, bigamist, bawd and cuckold and a public

nuisance to the citizens of Dublin and whereas at this commission of
 assizes the most honorable....His Honour, sir Frederick Falkiner. (384)

The judge in this passage is notorious for “hand[ing] down excessive sentences to Jews” (Reizbaum 109). This affects Bloom’s power in the novel by equating Bloom with a criminal—in a sense, the belief now that all Jews are criminals and should be treated as a “cultural myopia” (Reizbaum 110), unable to be understood and condemned for life.

Citizen, it seems was not the only character in *Ulysses* that expressed anti-Semitism for having values other than the standard Irish. It seems that even Stephen expressed some loathing of the Jews. During Ithaca, Bloom decides to sing the Ha-Tikvah, the Israeli National Anthem. Stephen responds by singing “The Ballad of Harry Hughes”, an “anti-Semitic verse that evokes the myth of ritual murder” (Reizbaum 110). Unfortunately for Bloom, this again affects his power as a character by taking away his original, Jewish voice and replacing it with something else. It seems that even Stephen, who Bloom most likely believes is substituting for the dead son, Rudy, still cannot shake the anti-Semitism taught by the Catholic Church, even though Bloom is the closest figure to a savior Stephen has ever known.

From the above listed examples, we can see that Bloom is indeed a “scapegoat in a land of scapegoats” (Reizbaum 113); men who themselves are persecuted, but are unable to align themselves with other people who are persecuted. Through these various chapters, Bloom’s power is raised and diminished through conversations of his Jewish “otherness”. Although Joyce did have a prototype of Bloom in M’Coy, a character from “Grace” who was just as “submissive in speech” (Magalaner 110) and action as Bloom was, the addition of Bloom’s Jewishness into the equation of characterization has yielded

a much more incredible result: concern for Bloom. The reader now feels for Bloom and can relate on a much more personal level. How many readers can say that they cannot relate to the archetypal image of the wandering, dejected, exile? The answer is not many because for most, the exile lives on inside of all of us.

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