

Redefining Hero and Heroism: Leopold Bloom as the Polyphonic Hero of *Ulysses*

Dr Nisha Francis Alapatt
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Vimala College

Abstract:

James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* is widely considered as a polyphonic novel. The polyphonic novel replaces the traditional epic heroes with characters who are ordinary rather than legendary. The typical epic hero is a figure of epic dimensions and possesses immeasurable talents, whereas the polyphonic hero is an ordinary person and deeply human in nature. This paper tries to explore the character of Leopold Bloom in James Joyce's *Ulysses* as a polyphonic hero. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the polyphonic hero is a 'self conscious' hero who constantly engages in inner dialogue, and embodies an open-endedness or unfinalisability which is central to a polyphonic novel. Bloom is a very ordinary human being of Jewish origin. He is a man with several flaws in character and faces problems in relationships and profession. At times he acts clumsy and passive and becomes the target of anti - Semitic taunts. These traits of vulnerability and resilience make him more of a polyphonic hero than an epic hero.

Keywords: Leopold Bloom, polyphonic hero, self conscious, dialogue, unfinalisability

James Joyce's *Ulysses* stands as a monumental work of modernist literature. It is renowned for its innovative narrative style and profound psychological insight. While many studies have focused on the narrative structure and stylistic innovations of *Ulysses* and on the character of Leopold Bloom, relatively few studies have specifically considered the novel as a polyphonic novel or examined the character of Leopold Bloom as a polyphonic hero within the polyphonic novel. This paper seeks to address this gap by examining Bloom as a highly self conscious hero who breaks the traditions of an epic hero.

James Joyce experiments with different heroes in his novels *Stephen Hero*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*. Stephen Dedalus is the protagonist of the first two novels and Leopold Bloom is the hero of the third novel. Joyce explains the reason for abandoning Stephen for Bloom in an interview with Frank Budgen: "Stephen is a self portrait, and therefore one-sided," whereas Bloom is "seen from all angles, as no self portrait can be seen" (Budgen 60). Perhaps Joyce was coming closer to Bakhtin's notion of a self conscious, open ended hero who constantly engages in dialogue with the author and other characters and even with himself and the surrounding world.

James Joyce writes a modern *Odyssey* and models his hero, Leopold Bloom on the epic hero Ulysses. *Ulysses* celebrates everyday life instead of epic quests. Usually, the duration of an epic is very long and the epic heroes possess extraordinary abilities. But Bloom is an extraordinarily ordinary man leading a very ordinary life. Leopold Bloom is an ordinary Jewish advertising canvasser in the Catholic Dublin whose interior monologues and dialogues reveal his thoughts, memory and private desires. His thoughts are mainly on mundane but universal human concerns like food, family, sexuality, loneliness and belonging.

In the epic structure of the novel maintained by Joyce, Bloom's "adventure" lasts only for one ordinary day in Dublin. Joyce believes that even ordinary things of ordinary people are worthy of discussion: "True, he is absent from home only about seventeen hours, but one day or many: it is of no consequence. If a thousand years may be as a day, why not a day as a thousand years?" (Budgen 65).

The novel describes Leopold Bloom, a Jewish advertising canvasser strolling through the streets of Dublin on June 16, 1904. Bloom's journey should not be seen as a merely physical journey on the streets of Dublin but should be seen as something that helps the full flowering of his consciousness. On this day, he goes to a

funeral, runs errands, eats lunch, deals with work, faces humiliation, and worries about his wife's fidelity. The alienation, jealousy, loss and longing which Bloom experiences are unique to him and can be witnessed directly as he experiences them and also through the eyes of others.

Bloom is a Jew who embraced Catholicism only to marry Molly who is a Catholic. Though he lives in Catholic Dublin, he is still a Jew at heart. His marriage to Molly is fraught with tension and he lives in constant fear of being cuckolded by his wife. Bloom's confession, "I have to live with myself" reveals his internal fears of accepting infidelity in marriage. His position as an 'outsider' to the Catholic faith, the predominant religion of Dublin and as an 'outsider' to the secrets of his wife is central to the understanding of his role in *Ulysses*. We are further informed that Bloom has a mixed ancestry. He is the son of Rudolph Virag and Ellen Higgins. Rudolph Virag was originally from Austria but he later he settled down in Dublin. He also changed his name to Rudolph Bloom. Leopold Bloom is sometimes mistaken for Bloom, the dentist. Leopold Bloom has lost his only son but has a teenage daughter. He is an ordinary human being with several failings and a figure grappling with social marginalisation – all these details unfurled before the reader enhance the reader's visualisation and understanding of the character. The reader can guess the age of Bloom mentioned in a periphrastic manner in the novel: "Bloom will be 70 in 1936 and 16 years senior to Stephen". As mentioned in the novel, the incidents in the novel take place on 16 June, 1904 and so the hero is now 38 years old. Bloom's weight was "eleven stones and four pounds in avoirdupois measure when weighed on the last feast of ascension on the twelfth day of May" (*Ulysses* 621).

Bloom is a victim of anti-Semitic prejudices that isolate him in the Catholic Dublin. Richard Ellmann describes Bloom as "the quintessential outsider, a figure who embodies the alienation of modern life" (Ellmann 45). This 'outsider' status has a persuasive influence on Bloom's interactions throughout the novel but Bloom's alienation does not preclude his capacity for empathy. The feeling of exclusion is ingrained in Bloom's psyche and it gets mentally articulated at the funeral of Paddy Dignam when Bloom reflects that "I am a stranger here" amidst the Catholic mourners. Thanks to Joyce's stream-of-consciousness technique that allows the reader to enter the psyche of the character. The narrative technique employed by Joyce in this novel immerses the readers in Bloom's thoughts oscillating between memories and desires, anxieties and observations.

Typical closed authorial descriptions defining the character are largely reduced in the novel and the reader gets to know the hero mostly through the hero's own words and through the various hints and suggestions given by others about the hero. An advertisement likely to be posted in case the hero goes missing gives us an understanding of the physical appearance of the hero: (...) missing gent above 40, answering to the name Bloom Leopold (Poldy), height 5ft, 9 1/2 inches, full build, olive complexion, may have since grown a beard, when last seen was wearing a black suit (*Ulysses* 679). His collar size is 17 and waistcoat 5 buttons. He is very handsome and resembles Lord Byron and he possesses a splendid set of teeth which makes his wife Molly "hungry to look at them". He has a "sinewless and wobbly" body and has a fine complexion which he used to show off by wearing a zingari coloured muffler. Even the minutest and the most trivial details of the hero is mentioned in the novel. We can see Bloom selecting a black overcoat for that day's funeral in front of the reader: "Be a warm day I fancy. Specially in these black clothes feel it more" (*Ulysses* 55).

The reader comes to know more and more about the hero through his actions, interactions, interior monologues and through the stray comments made by his wife, friends and acquaintances. According to Budgen, most of the observations coming from Bloom will be "brilliant but singular, organic, Bloomesque" (Budgen 107). A quick definition of love, according to Bloom is "the opposite of hatred" (*Ulysses* 319). Again, Bloom is notorious for the factual 'near misses' he blurts out which the critic Richard Ellmann calls "Bloomism." Bloom can very effortlessly say "Eulogy Written in a Country Churchyard" instead of "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" or "Ides of June" instead of "Ides of March". Though intended for fun, the character becomes very natural and spontaneous in his lively responses.

In order to destroy any predictability regarding the character of Bloom, the author compiles information gathered from people connected to him: "We see him as he appears to himself and as he exists in the minds of his wife, his friends and his fellow citizens. By the end of the day we know more about him than we know about any character in fiction.[...] Bloom stands in the open and we can walk around him" (Budgen 66).

Bloom's identity is also shaped by his memories. Memories, both happy and sad haunt his mind and shape the actions of the day. His grief over his deceased son Rudy has an enduring impact on his psyche. Bloom develops a paternal relationship with the young artist Stephen Dedalus in an attempt to re-live the memories of his dead son. He is also constantly nagged by the thought of the adultery which his wife is going to commit. The city of Dublin also has a great influence on Bloom's identity. Bloom's internal reflections are framed by his encounters with the inhabitants of Dublin. Bloom experiences the cultural divisions of Ireland and the religious tensions between Catholicism and Judaism during his wanderings through diverse spaces in Dublin.

Joyce thinks that a character is best displayed in "...the commonest acts of life. How a man ties his shoelaces or how he eats his egg will give a better clue to his differentiation than how he goes forth to war" (Budgen 75). The deepest truths about human character are revealed not in extraordinary, heroic moments, but in the most ordinary, everyday actions. The way a person eats, speaks or moves reveal more about him and no great thing about him can be as characteristic "as the sit of a hat" (Budgen 75). The author also exposes the character through various writing styles which he employs in each of the 18 chapters of the novel. As Richard Pearce points out: "[m]any voices contribute to the telling of his [Bloom's] story; indeed each chapter brings in a new voice, which may augment, counterpoint, undermine, or usurp the authorial storytelling voice" (60). In Joyce's own words, he was representing a fully "rounded" character or a "full human personality" (Budgen 21) in *Ulysses*.

Conclusion

By choosing Bloom, an unremarkable Dublin Catholic-Jew, as the "hero" of his modern epic, Joyce reimagined and redefined the concept of hero and heroism. Joyce has tried to retain the polyphonic nature of the hero by not indulging in any excess "surplus of vision" in the portrayal of Bloom. Bloom certainly defies definition but emerges as a new type of a novelistic hero who is yet unfinalised and is in constant dialogue with himself and with others. Bloom does not turn out to be an epic hero but he becomes a polyphonic hero in the remarkable display of his self-consciousness.

Works Consulted:

1. Alapatt, Nisha Francis. *Polyphony and Fiction: A Reading of James Joyce's Ulysses*. Diss. Mahatma Gandhi U, 2002.
2. Attridge, Derek, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to James Joyce*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990.
3. Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. 1929. Ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984.
4. Budgen, Frank. *James Joyce and the Making of "Ulysses" and other Writings*. 1934; rpt. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1972.
5. Ellmann, Richard. *James Joyce*. 1959; rev.ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983.
6. Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. Ed. Jeri Johnson. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993.
7. Kenner, Hugh. *Dublin's Joyce*. London: Chatto, 1956.
8. Pearce, Lynne. *Reading Dialogics*. London: Edward Arnold, 1994.
9. Pearce, Richard. *The Politics of Narration: James Joyce, William Faulkner, and Virginia Woolf*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1992.