

## IDENTITY IN *ULYSSES*: SEXUALITY OF GERTY MACDOWELL AND MOLLY BLOOM

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The characters Gerty MacDowell and Molly Bloom in James Joyce's *Ulysses* are both represented largely in terms of sexuality. The intricacies and significances of their sexualities, however, are not initially obvious from their thoughts, narratives, and descriptions. These two characters are easily pigeonholed into debased and oversimplified stereotypes of female sexuality that disregard their complex individual motivations and values. Gerty is not merely the silly ingénue that her hyperbolic language and occupation with her appearance suggest, and to condemn Molly as indiscreet, immoral, and simple-mindedly sex-obsessed is to deny the importance of her strong and uninhibited assertion and affirmation of female sexual agency and self-determination. In a world where women are subordinate to male will and desire, these two characters have managed to assert their sexual identities without being enslaved by their own desires. Gerty's and Molly's identities are largely defined by sexuality, but are not simply ruled by men's or their own; they are masters of their strong and unique sexual identities and take skillful advantage of their sexual powers and agencies.

Gerty MacDowell, if hastily judged, is a ridiculous and pathetic creature, a victim of male sexual dominance and definition and her own naïveté that merits no serious character analysis. Her dramatic and overly romanticized musings identify her with a farcical tragic heroine of a romance novel, and it is difficult to take her seriously. She discusses at length and with pride her meticulous attention to her appearance as if it were her chief and all-important concern, adding simple-minded vanity to her limited character repertoire. Finally, she appears dominated by male sexuality, assigning herself worth as a desirable commodity for a wife

and functioning in the plot simply as an object for Leopold Bloom's lust. Gerty's sexuality is understandably misconstrued as weak, pitiable, and only important in reference to the male sexualities that define it.

Gerty's narrative seems dominated by sentimentalism and narcissism, and it is easy to write her off as an uncomplicated and silly character, a mere synthesis of the "fashion pages of the *Lady's Pictorial*, the heated prose of Victorian sentimental novels, and the advertising pages of the *Irish Times*" (Henke 132). When we first encounter Gerty she treats us to a lengthy and lyrical description of the scene surrounding her. From the opening moments, when the "last glow of all too fleeting day lingered lovingly on sea and strand" (Joyce 346), we hear the influence of the romance novels she wills her life to resemble in her language. She becomes the tragic heroine in her "self-deluding romantic aspirations . . . or her Reggy Wylie" and her idealistic dreams about marriage (Brown 115). Her narrative also describes the particulars of her appearance in great detail, going on about her natural good looks and the hard work and constant attention she gives them. The majority of her idea of herself appears to stem from her beauty and femininity, and from the husband they might win her; she appears entirely defined by shallow vanity and looking pretty for the opposite sex. She assigns herself worth as "Mrs. Reggie Wylie T. C. D." and then Leopold Bloom's "dear little wifey"—she seems entirely male-dependent. This sexual objectification is magnified in the incident of Gerty's exhibition to Bloom—she is an anonymous visual stimulus for his sexual desire, and she allows herself to be used by the dominant sexuality across the beach.

However, these oversimplified judgments overlook the particulars of Gerty's situation that provide logical reasoning for her quest for a husband. If we analyze Gerty's life and circumstances, we can see past the flowery language and gushing romanticism to the practical goal Gerty is working toward. Katherine Mullin describes in *James Joyce, Sexuality, and Social Purity* how Gerty's less-than-ideal home life is the motivation for her husband-hunting. She grew up in a poor household with an alcoholic father: "Had her father only avoided the clutches of the demon drink . . . she might now be rolling in her carriage, second to none . . . but [alcoholism] had cast its shadow over her childhood" (Joyce 354). Gerty has little prospect of a career outside the home to support herself, and she very prac-

tically aims to secure a brighter financial future than the one before her the only way she can. "Marriage is her most plausible preservation from want" Mullin says, and "[her] desire to attract is blatantly motivated by her bleak financial prospects" (148). Gerty's fantasies about "the day . . . when she could call herself his little wife" prominently feature the fine furnishings of her future home, describing at length particulars of a "drawingroom with pictures and engravings," "chintz covers for the chairs and that silver toastrack" "Like they have in rich houses" (Joyce 352). She specifically favors an older man, "hair slightly flecked with grey," who would be more likely able to support her and, as to fulfill her second objective, more a replacement father-figure to "take her in his sheltering arms" and care for her (351). Gerty seeks a husband, not to validate herself or fulfill her girlish daydreams, but to replace what her alcoholic and abusive father has failed to provide: financial and emotional security. This underlying practicality elevates her from victim of male-defined sexual objectification to shrewd wielder of the limited advantages at her disposal.

Once her quest for a husband shifts from sentimental longing to calculated means to a financial end, Gerty's occupation with her appearance also changes to just that—an occupation. Gerty means to secure her financial future by getting married. Her looks, then, are her most appropriable resource for achieving that goal. She is fighting against steep odds. According to Maria Luddy, the percentage of unmarried women in Ireland at this time is high (Mullin 148). Gerty is crippled, and she is past the age that her coquetry is at its best chance for success, with "the years [still] slipping by for her, one by one" (Joyce 364). She must make efficient use of every possible advantage at her disposal if she is to have any hope of winning a man. Gerty is apparently advantaged in her looks: "She was pronounced beautiful by all who knew her" (348), and "you would have to travel many a mile before you found a head of hair the like of" Gerty's "nutbrown tresses" (360). She doesn't idly rely on nature's favor though; to maximize her chance of success, Gerty manages and capitalizes on her assets with professionalism—as Garry Leonard says in *Advertising and Commodity Culture in Joyce*, her "appearance is her career" (115). "Gerty's extraordinary attention to [her appearance] is not, as has often been suggested, an indication of simple-mindedness, but rather a strategy of increasingly desperate shrewdness whereby she hopes to decisively defeat

other women in terms of her appearance” (Leonard 115). Her hands “of finely veined alabaster” are “as white as lemon juice and queen of ointments could make them” (Joyce 348); she judiciously makes use of innovations like “blushing scientifically cured” and “Madame Vera Verity[‘s]” suggestion of “eyebrowline which gave that haunting expression” (349). She is diligent and thorough in her work: “All Tuesday week afternoon she was hunting to match that chenille but at last she found what she wanted” (350). Gerty is industrious and painstaking in her particular occupation, tirelessly focused on achieving her goal of wooing a means of financial security and companionship. Her pride in her looks is not vanity, but necessity and clever opportunity.

Gerty’s interaction with Bloom also showcases her expertise and focus in her calculated, deliberate movements and specialized know-how. Gerty conscientiously shows off her “well-turned ankle” (350) and the “bright steel buckles of her shoes” when she “sw[ings] them like that thoughtfully with the toes down” (358). She deliberately removes her hat to show off her “crowning glory,” her “daint[y] head of nutbrown tresses” (360). Her exhibitionist display later on, Katherine Mullin points out, is pointedly reminiscent of a new and popular technology in erotica of the time—the mutoscope, a hand-crank individual moving picture device. The moving pictures were most often shots of girls scarcely—or not—clothed, with the pretense of looking through a peephole. The girls presumably were unaware that they were being watched, just as Gerty feigned innocence with her “pathetic little glance of piteous protest, of shy reproach” (Joyce 367). The mutoscope machine is manually operated by a hand-crank that allows the viewer to control the speed at which the pictures move, drawing out and even pausing to fully relish a particularly appealing still. Gerty deliberately makes use of this tableau technique in her innocent statuesque pose at the opening of the narrative and throughout her exhibition. Her pretense of craning back to watch the fireworks and air of “accidentally” revealing herself to Bloom uses the mutoscope’s “peeping Tom” technique to add the thrill of opportunistically catching a woman unawares. Gerty’s apparent knowledge of current erotic film techniques catapult her from innocent victim to skillful seductress.

So Gerty is not simply a victim to Bloom’s sexual desire but a skillful exploiter of it. She willingly participates in and shrewdly steers their

interaction, both maximizing her effect on him and taking pleasure in his reaction. Her calculated performance clearly demonstrates that she is not merely bowing to Bloom's lustful will but basking in his admiration and seizing this potential opportunity to win her prize. While she is fixated on her objective, she doesn't deny herself the pleasure of expressing and sharing romantic passion; she "is not merely a passive object of Bloom's voyeurism or complicit through her coquetry and exhibitionism alone" but to a lesser extent shares in Bloom's physical arousal and gratification (Brown 61). Bloom's "answering flush of admiration" when she removed her hat to display her hair "set her tingling in every nerve," and she replaced the hat so as to be able to watch him watch her (Joyce 360). She "felt a kind of sensation rushing all over her" (361); "the eyes that were fastened upon her set her pulses tingling" and a "tremor went over her" while "his hands and face were working" (365). But Gerty is in control, both of her own desire and of her fulfillment of Bloom's—she is not an innocent victim taken advantage of or a wanton slave to her own passion, but a sovereign actor with sexual drive, yes, but first and foremost agency and purpose.

Molly Bloom's sexuality is very different from Gerty's but is similarly vulnerable to hasty interpretation. Molly is an unashamedly sexual character and is not in danger of being labeled frivolously romantic or trampled and male-identified the way Gerty can be, but her sexuality is prone to judgmental dismissal as crude, wanton, and immoral. Discussion of her character helped to quagmire *Ulysses* in dilemmas of morality, and so came to be dominated by her "25 lovers in 'Ithaca'" rather than "interest in the contentious presentation of sexuality" (Brown 3). Molly's narrative is indeed characterized by an uninhibited description of carnal desire and gratification, but the importance of her sexual agency and self-determination run throughout her memories and musings and is the real hallmark of Molly's unique and strong sexuality.

Molly's assertiveness and autonomy are reflected in the ways that her relationship with Bloom came about; she was the agent in the relationship, and she chose him. In the essay "En-Gendered Choice and Agency in *Ulysses*" in *Ulysses in Critical Perspective*, Kimberly J. Delvin tells how Bloom recalls their meeting at Mat Dillon's party, when he turned the pages of her music while she performed. He asks himself why she chose him; she specifically invited him to "proximity . . . allow[ing] a closer

inspection of her physical charms (“Bosoms I saw, both full” [U,11.732]) and a whiff of her perfume” (Delvin 83). The song she chose to sing that night, Delvin points out, also demonstrates her decisive and active courting of Bloom rather than her gender’s typical role of the seduced. The song was called “Waiting,” and the lyrics describe the anticipation and proximity of her lover and directing him to come to her; Molly chooses this particular song (which is also performatively difficult and impressive) in order to, “[u]nder the pretext of the socially acceptable party ritual of the parlor performance, . . . [make] clear her attraction to Bloom” (Delvin 84). Molly quotes the last lines of the song in her reverie—“waiting always waiting to guiiiide him tooooo me waiting nor speeded his flying feet” (Joyce 757). She also reminisces about the day on Howth that she and Bloom became engaged—about how she “got him to propose” and made him “ask again” (782–3). Bloom also recalls this day and is the object rather than subject of the verbs he uses: “her hand touched me, caressed,” “ravished over her I lay,” “she gave me in my mouth the seedcake,” “[s]he kissed me. I was kissed. All yielding she tossed my hair. Kissed, she kissed me.” He is overwhelmingly acted upon rather than acting, attributing agency primarily to Molly. Both of their memories place her in the typically male role of engineer and conductor of the relationship.

Molly’s dominance or at least self-determination in relationships is not limited to Bloom. She also recalls her other lovers as having been chosen and won by her. She congratulates herself on having won Boylan, remembering how she had gone back to the place where she first saw him “for tea 2 days after in the hope but he wasn’t” (745), again actively pursuing the man she set her sights on. She also expresses her personal agency when she appraises Boylan’s performance and character and compares him to Bloom. This evaluation of the two men asserts her right to determine and contemplate each prospect’s qualifications and choose between them. She casually considers the idea of leaving Bloom. She doesn’t seriously entertain the idea; it is only a fleeting thought—connected with her reflection on her and other last names—“those awful names with bottom in them Mrs Ramsbottom or some other kind of a bottom Mulvey I wouldnt go mad about either or suppose I divorced him Mrs Boylan my mother whoever she was might have given me a nicer name” (761)—but its unrepentant presence in her mind shows that she feels entitled to sexual free-

dom and choice. Obviously the act of having an affair with Boylan asserts her independence from Bloom, but her attitude regarding the rendezvous—her agency in bringing it about and her self-assured authoritative appraisal of the two men—promotes her affair from a “stolen” or “fallen” idea of infidelity to a manifestation of her strong and independent sexuality.

Gerty MacDowell and Molly Bloom are very different characters who share a tendency to be oversimplified and stereotyped. They are easily relegated to the realm of hackneyed, meaningless characters before the complexities of their sexualities and identities are understood. In fact, both characters’ sexualities are intricately and interestingly woven into their identities in ways that are missed by their initial impressions. Gerty is not a flighty, vain, hopeless romantic who is swallowed up by the male sexualities that dominate her world, but a skillful opportunist working towards a practical goal in an extremely competitive environment. Molly is not simply indulgent and ruled by her carnal desires, but asserts her own equality by claiming the right to sexual agency and self-determination. Both women’s identities are largely defined by their sexualities, but those sexualities are far more intricate and well-developed than the impressions they first elicit.

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