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The Key Motif: From Odysseus to Epiclesis

James Joyce's *Ulysses* is filled with endless layers of meaning and complexities, the key motif being a great example. It serves as a medium of Odyssean correspondence establishing a father-son relationship between Stephen and Bloom, also acting as a symbol of domestic usurpation and reclamation of the household. In conjunction, the key motif also functions within the interlaced themes of Irish nationalist politics, sexuality, and advertisement. Through these themes, the motif serves as a projection of the novel's structure itself and as a manifestation of the epiclesis Joyce aspired to integrate into his works.

The key first appears in chapter I, in which Buck says, "give me that key, Kinch," ordering Stephen to hand over the key to the tower (1.721). Stephen is unhappy, thinking, "It is mine. I paid the rent," but he nevertheless gives it away (1.631). Even before Buck takes the key and Stephen's money, he acts in immature ways that displease Stephen, such as performing a mock mass and hosting his English friend Haines who disrupts Stephen's sleep and acts in a condescending manner. Mulligan and Haines function as the usurpers of Stephen's household. They correspond to the suitors in *The Odyssey,* who take over Telemachus' home with no regard to their obnoxious actions, plundering the palace and disrespecting boundaries. Immediately, the key serves as a connection between the Telemachan son Stephen and Odyssean father Bloom, who is also "usurped" and keyless. Joyce scholar W.B. Stanford argues the usurpation and lack of key is an example of "consubstantiality of the Father and the Son," in which "Stephen shares Ulyssean qualities with Bloom" (qtd. in Paterakis 97). This is just one of many parallels created between the two men, the consubstantiality between the two functioning under the umbrella of metempsychosis, or "transmigration of souls" (4.342), that provides framework for Odyssean correspondences of characters beyond the father-son duo.

The appearance of the key in the "Aeolus" chapter is rather different from the first, as the key is not physical in form. Bloom is attempting to secure an ad in the newspaper for Alexander Keyes. "Two crossed keys here. A circle. Then here the name," Bloom explains. "The idea…is the house of keys…Innuendo of home rule" (7.142-50). The House of Keys is the lower house of parliament governing over the Isle of Man who has "a qualified home rule," unlike Ireland (Gifford 131). Home rule is the Irish movement toward self governance, free from British influence. The punny Keyes ad alludes to this lack of and search for a key—i.e. the Irish version of home rule—which is being prevented by the British. As "the key is an everyday symbol of possession [and] dominion" (White 10), it is worthy to note that even in the personal lives of Stephen and Bloom, there exists a correlation between British characters and the possession of power, visible through their thwarting of the two's respective daily efforts (Paterakis 101). As established by the ad, home rule and notions of Irishness are important to the general population, and are thus prevalent topics of conversation throughout "Ulysses" and integral parts of understanding the key motif.

One instance of this kind of conversation takes place in the "Cyclops" episode at the bar. The nationalist citizen repeatedly speaks about the greatness of Ireland along with Irish-English conflicts, creating a strong "us and them" tone. Even beyond hate for the controlling British, the citizen is very biased against those not "purely Gael," even if they are Irish-born (Gifford 130). He states "We want no more strangers in our house," targeting Bloom for his Jewish heritage (12.1150). In this sense, Bloom is cast out of and doesn't belong in his own nation in the minds of the purists; the nationalists are looking for a "key," yet they take the key away from Bloom, who is locked out of Ireland in their eyes. Later on in "Circe" during a hallucination, "Bloom reveals his deepest longing …to be accepted by his fellow Dublin citizens" (White 22). In his

vision of himself in a position of political power, “the keys of Dublin are given to him” (15.1520), once again symbolizing a yearning for possession of and belonging in Ireland, his home.

Returning to “Cyclops,” the citizen mentions how “a dishonoured wife” is “the cause of all our misfortunes,” referring to Irish political leader Parnell’s mistress Kitty O’Shea and the adulterous scandal that damaged the home rule movement (12.1163). This is one correlation between domesticity and Irish national politics drawn initially. Another particularly significant statement of Bloom’s is uttered not long after this occurrence. Attempting to diffuse the hatred in the pub, he preaches that nations should not perpetuate hatred amongst each other, and is subsequently asked what he thinks a nation is. Bloom replies, “A nation is the same people living in the same place” (12.1422). He is ridiculed by one of the other men, who says he himself has achieved nationhood “for living in the same place for the past five years” (12.1424). Although missing the point Bloom was making, the pub-goer is actually successful in coming close to the novel’s technique of creating parallels between the home and nation.

The key is integral in bridging the gap between this aforementioned national home rule and “home rule” in the domestic sense; the two spheres brilliantly unite under the motif. Early on, it is clear that Bloom is not only attempting to prove he belongs in his nation, but also that he belongs as a husband, heading his own house. His wife, Molly, is having an affair with Blazes Boylan. Just as Odysseus must find his way home over the span of ten years, Bloom must find his way back to a healthy relationship after “a period of 10 years, 5 months, and 18 days during which carnal intercourse had been incomplete” (17.2282). Throughout Bloom’s day, the key parallels the initial loss of home and progress back, both in a literal sense of Bloom returning to his house after wandering around Dublin, and in a figurative sense relating to his marriage.

The initial lack of a physical key occurs at the beginning of Bloom's day when he "fe[els] in his hip pocket for the latchkey" but realizes it isn't there. He put it in the pocket of a different pair of trousers (4.72). He does seem to be a forgetful person, as he forgets to pick up Molly's moisturizer (as she expects him to), forgets where his hat is, and forgets to pay back the storekeeper for a purchase. But, this forgetfulness concerning the key holds a significance beyond an everyday personal negligence. This misplacing of the key symbolizes Bloom misplacing his husbandly duties. Instead of writing love letters to Molly, he converses through letters with another woman, Martha Clifford. Rather than placing the key to his house in his pocket, he instead slips the letters symbolic of his emotional infidelity into his pocket (5.65). He also misplaces overt sexual desires, as seen with his full masturbation to Gerty on the beach in "Nausicaa" (13.851).

Yet, even early on there is a clue related to this misplacing of the key that indicates an eventual return home. In "Lotus Eaters," Bloom chooses to buy a "sweet lemony" soap (5.512) and places it in his pocket, carrying it around with him all day. The soap essentially takes the place that the key would take for the day. Because of lemon's association with fidelity (Gifford 98), it seems that though he forgot the key and placed the letter indicative of infidelity and being lost, he places the soap in after, alluding to his ultimate choice of fidelity. Even though he is still wandering and doesn't yet have the key, he has already commenced his journey back to Molly, in a sense.

The fact that Bloom doesn't have a key is his own fault, which also relates to Molly's perception of the relationship. Referring to Bloom, Molly thinks "it's all his fault if I'm an adulteress" (18.1516). She believes he is unfaithful and dislikes his ogling at women, his encounter with Mary Driscoll, and other various quirks of his, along with the fact that women are

always treated “like dirt” by men (18.1433). In this sense, Bloom has usurped himself: fully from the house today in forgetting the key, and partially through his incompetence in the relationship. In addition, Bloom reminded himself that he must retrieve the key from the house: “he remembered that he had reminded himself twice not to forget” (17.78). He had a chance to retrieve the key, or figuratively repair the relationship, but instead remained complicit in his exiled state. Although Bloom may have usurped himself originally, Molly and Boylan still play a role in furthering this usurpation with their sexual relationship, both who also are associated with the key motif.

Boylan is associated with a “jingle,” seen in “Sirens,” as he travels to the Blooms’ house. While the jingle is traditionally associated with the noise of Boylan’s carriage (Gifford 291) and the quoits of Molly’s bed making noise during intercourse (18.1131), the jingle could also be representative of the jingle of metaphorical keys, or power, in Boylan’s pocket. The word “jingle” was used in relation to Myles Crawford’s keys in “Aeolus,” after all (7.459). Whether or not this is what Joyce intended, Boylan still does have a key in a sense: access to Molly that Bloom doesn’t have. And, just as Stephen was usurped by Buck and Haines by lack of key, there is a brief parallel drawn between Molly and Haines. Just as Haines wanted to make a book out of Stephen’s sayings, Molly mentions that she would like to write a book out of “the works of Master Poldy” (18.580), which hints that she has played a role toward Bloom analogous with that of Haines toward Stephen.

Diving more explicitly into the theme of sexuality, the key also functions as a phallic symbol. When Bloom finally retrieves the key, he is able to unlock the door to his house “by inserting the barrel of the arruginated male key into the hose of an unstable female lock” (17.1215), which is a rather inconspicuous suggestion of the sex organs. Returning to the Keyes

ad, Bloom mentions that the ad is an "innuendo." While "innuendo" can simply mean an indirect hint toward, it has sexual connotations. Two crossing keys, along with their correspondence to the two kinds of home rule, are symbolic of the Bloom's and Boylan's sex organs, meeting and coming into competition through their relationships with Molly. This phallic association with the key is further supported by the Bello scene in "Circe." Without a key, Bloom is essentially unmanned. This "unmanning" happens in an extremely literal sense in the phantasmic scene in which Bloom is humiliated, turned into a woman, and referred to as "her" (15. 2880-2968). This lack of penis reflects his lack of a key.

The context and theme of advertising itself is significant also. Throughout the novel, Bloom is constantly relating things to marketing which "stimulate[s] him in his cogitations" (17.576) and imagining how he could market things. Yet, he is unsuccessful in "selling" himself to Molly, as he evidently lacks the qualities of what he deems a good ad to have, which is "magnetising efficacy to arrest involuntary attention, to interest, to convince, to decide" (17.583). Returning to the Keyes ad as a whole, it should be noted that Bloom is not successful in getting it placed. This reflects how he isn't successful (at least yet) in winning the key or Molly back; here the two keys represent Bloom and Molly in marriage.

Although Bloom didn't succeed in getting the ad or possessing the key, he is still slowly inserting himself back into what he sees as his rightful position as a husband. Even though the door is locked and he is keyless, he finds himself inside. He knows his house well enough to know how to reenter with his "strategum," as long as he is willing to put in the effort (17.84). Further, he asks Molly to make him breakfast, which he hasn't done in a long time, possibly as another reassertion of his traditional place as a husband (Paterakis 107). With this request, he is

metaphorically "getting his foot in the locked door," slowly starting to move toward confronting Molly and regaining his version of home rule.

Acting within these other contexts, the key is reflective of the novel's structures and techniques as a whole. It reappears scattered throughout the text, without immediately obvious significance, a participant in the "delayed decoding" style of the novel, in which the significance of small details become apparent retrospectively (Feb. 23 Lecture). In addition, a lock and key can't work without each other, similar to how this novel doesn't work without the "parallax" of multiple characters' perspectives. Specifically focusing on this aspect as it relates to advertisements, Professor Daniel P. Gunn argues that the Keyes ad, among others, is an "imitation of the novel in which [it] appear[s]" (489).

Gunn considered the permitting of Bloom to imagine and rearrange parts of the ad to "create a second level of meaning" (489) as "referr[ing] to the technique of Joyce's own work in a systematic way" (483). Continuing, he states that "Joyce encourages us to imagine the Keyes advertisement as a work of art…with a rich allusive texture—and in doing so, he creates another version of Ulysses" (491). In giving the art of advertisement a role in the art of literature, Joyce is convoluting the distinction between high and low culture (483), which is an integral feature of his literary style as a whole. Even outside the context of advertisement, Joyce is successful in playing with the ordinary into the extraordinary; turning the microcosm into a macrocosm and vice versa. He is able to take *The Odyssey,* an epic of huge proportions and scale it down to a single day. He is able to take issues in Irish politics and scale them down to parallel the domestic.

Finally, he is able to brilliantly lift the key, an object of everyday life to a "spiritual" level with high meaning through means of ascribing Odyssean correspondences that interact with themes of contemporary Irish politics, sexuality, and the art of advertisement. This epitomizes

the literary epiclesis (the transformation of the bread into Christ's body) he intends to include in his works (Jan. 24 Lecture). From Odysseus to epiclesis, from one home rule to the other home rule, Joyce accords such an elaborate significance to the key, making it more extraordinary and meaningful than imaginable. And, in doing this, he creates a motif in his novel that functions on a macroscopic level as *Ulysses* does in the English literary world.

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