The Portrayal of Menstruation in *Ulysses*: Commentary on Sensationalism, Confinement, Realism and Intimacy

Throughout James Joyce's *Ulysses*, the protagonist, Leopold Bloom confronts and questions depictions of the idealized female form. For example, in one episode he investigates whether or not the statues of nude goddesses at Dublin's National Gallery have all the same orifices that he does. This episode, referenced repeatedly throughout the text, is just one of many attempts to complicate idealization and a culture that neglects to address the totality of the body through frank explorations of bodily realities. One such bodily reality, menstruation, offers a particular form of commentary because of its intimate ties to femininity. The depictions of menstruation throughout the novel are wildly different, from the stifled portrayal of Gerty Macdowell in "Nausica," to Gerty's sensational act of exposing her bloody clout in the hallucinatory "Circe," to Molly Bloom's frank, realistic frustration in "Penelope." But in their own way, all portrayals ironize traditional constructions of femininity, and ask a reader to critically consider a culture that promotes gendered behavior but dismisses bodily realities of sexual difference.

Before we can assess the significance of Gerty's shocking reappearance in "Circe, we must first investigate the ways in which Gerty's narrative treatment in "Nausica" necessitates this type of subversive addendum. In other words, what violence justifies and provokes such sensational resistance? An analysis of the prose style provides insight.

Unlike Joyce's intimate portrayals of Leopold Bloom and Molly Bloom as narrated in the first-person, Gerty is narrated in the third person – a style that emphasizes, as opposed to minimizes, distance between reader and character. The third-person narration may also reflect juvenile, self-narrated fantasies of self-importance, suggesting that this is the language of dishonest engagements as opposed to frank confrontations with reality. In this same vein, the prose style also actively suppresses or stifles anything popularly deemed ugly, vulgar or emotionally wild. This suspicious stylistic practice is introduced from the outset of the chapter. The second sentence of the opening paragraph reads, "Far away in the west the sun was setting and the last glow of all too fleeting day lingered lovingly on sea and strand, on the proud promontory of dear old Howth…"(284). The sentimental phrase "all too fleeting day," simply negates the realities of Bloom's torturous day thus far in a wash of inappropriate cliché. The narrative style's immediate suppression of pain and struggle sets the tone for the chapter.

Similarly, though the line, "From everything in the least indelicate her finebred nature instinctively recoiled" (299) refers to Gerty, this sentence can also be read as a lens through which to interpret the narrative style. For example, a reader can't help but note the abundance of euphemisms – the outhouse is "that place" (291), menstruation is "that thing" (296), and even an article as benign as a toddler's unsoiled diaper is referred to as his "unmentionables" (285). Indeed, when the content of the narrative even borders on vulgarity, the prose reasserts its control and overcompensates stylistically with euphemism after euphemism.

More disturbingly, the prose style also stifles ugly emotional realities. For example, Gerty's painful account of her father's alcoholism is diffused by prose language

that inappropriately sentimentalizes Gerty's situation. For example, the text explains "But the vile decoction which has ruined so many heaths and homes had cast its shadow over her childhood days. Nay, she had even witness in the home circle deeds of violence caused by intemperance and has seen her own father, a prey to the fumes of intoxication, forget himself completely…"(290). The content of this narrative is truly painful, but the manner in which it is presented doesn't adequately recognize or address that pain; words like "nay" and "vile decoction" are too precious and distractingly exotic to truly capture the ugliness of the situation.

By this point in the novel, a careful reader should realize that this chapter's half-hearted engagement with emotion and the body is suspicious. This prose style is unlike the truthful prose of Bloom, our "unconquered hero," (217). A reader must ask: why is Gerty narrated in this manner, to what end? Many argue that the narrative style of "Nausica" can be read as Joyce's portrait of a young Dublin woman's self-narration after deeply internalizing popular culture's representations of femininity; Gerty has been so inundated by cultural fodder that she is only equipped to tell herself her own story using these materials. Indeed, Gerty's intimate thoughts are disturbingly intertwined with the gendered machinery of consumer culture; if the preceding chapter, "Cyclops," links maleness and subsequent male aggression with ideologies of nationalism, Nausica links the enactment of femininity with sentimental novels like *The Lamplighter* and advertisements for beauty products. For example, Gerty's physical description is interwoven with the list of beauty products she uses. The text reads, "Gerty's [eyes] were of the bluest Irish blue, set off by lustrous lashes and dark expressive brows. Time was when those brows were not so silkily seductive. It was Madame Vera, directress of the

Woman Beautiful page of the Princess Novellete, who had first advised her to try eyebrow line…so becoming in leaders of fashion…Then there was blushing scientifically cured and how to be tall increase your height and you have a beautiful face, but your nose?"(286). In this passage the overly sentimental prose voice gives way to the language of advertisements, not only suggesting that texts like the "Princess Novellete" profoundly effects the ways Gerty experiences her own body, but that they are, in fact, one in the same. Gerty has so internalized the language and ideology of these magazines that they are inseparable from her experience of herself.

Yet while it is plausible that the prose style of "Nausica" reflects Gerty's profound internalization of cultural materials and subsequent construction of her self-narrative with this equipment, there are moments in the chapter that feel like Gerty isn't corroborating with her own narration but is instead being forcibly narrated by the greater cultural script. Evidence of this can be explored in the script's absence – moments where the narrative "slips up," and allows unscripted prose to intrude. Fissures between subject and narrator can be witnessed in Gerty's unsentimental anger with her companions. For example, Edy Boardman is described as an "Irritable little gnat"(295), a "confounded little cat"(297), and as a "little kinnatt" (297), language and sentiments that violate the greater social code of feminine appropriateness. Gerty also internally notes that Cissy Caffery whistled "to show what a great person she was"(301). This clunky, jealous remark lacks the obscuring sentimentality of the opening paragraph, suggesting a snapshot into Gerty's mental world that is adulterated by an external narrative voice. Additionally, the phrase "…and who that knows the fluttering hopes and fears of sweet seventeen (though Gerty would never see seventeen again), can find it in his head to

blame her…"(288), is particularly suspect. The retrospective quality of the parenthetical aside seems uncharacteristic of Gerty's inner-monologue and instead suggests the presence of an external, narrating force. Another fissure can be detected in the use of compound words like "girlwoman" and "dreamhusband" – conspicuously innovative language that may reflect Gerty's unexplored emotional urgency and creativeness. The suspicion that Gerty possesses qualities that the narrative prose can only hint at, and the ambiguity as to if Gerty is narrating (leading) or being narrated (led), can be read as a commentary on the non-stop machine of modernity that subsumes the lives of Dublin' inhabitants; a controlling, confining force that molds narrative facts to fit an acceptable form. It is just this type of phenomenon that requires subversion later, in "Circe."

Yet whether or not Gerty is entirely complicit with her own stifling narration, this much is clear: for Joyce, a realist, Gerty's disembodiment and idealization must be problematized by the intrusion of base, bodily realities, like menstruation. As expected, Gerty's treatment of menstruation is in keeping with her adherence to socially appropriate norms: an account of her menstruation is so buried in the text that readers are likely to miss it. Furthermore, Gerty dumbly calls her menstruation "that thing," reflecting a deep disengagement that is further juxtaposed by Bloom's frankness on the subject at the chapter's close. So while Gerty is obsessed with the pop cultural machinery of femininity, she cannot even adequately name the biological reality that makes her a female. Gerty's treatment of her own menstruation in this chapter therefore offers further commentary on the ways that appropriate females, like Gerty, aren't equipped with the tools to truthfully confront their own bodies.

Further compounding this criticism is Gerty's textual ties to the Virgin Mary, the archetype of idealized, pure females. The Virgin Mary is introduced in the first paragraph of the chapter and thus, from the outset, offers a frame through which to consider Gerty's insistent purity. As the chapter continues, sounds from the nearby temperance retreat are interspersed with Gerty's narrative, contributing to the tensions between religion, salvation and sex that dominate this chapter. These religious interpolations are further explored and more highly charged in the paragraph where Gerty starts to menstruate. This paragraph opens with Canon O'Hanlon censing the sacrament and closes with the assurance that Bloom is "literally worshipping at her [Gerty's] shrine" (296). The juxtaposition of Gerty's menstrual blood against this religious imagery asks readers to consider the link between the church, purified body and blood, and the actual, physical bodies and blood of parishioners. Readers ask asked to probe the hypocrisy of an institution that elevates blood and body in their symbolic form, but has bred a culture that teaches women to be so shameful of their blood and bodies that they confess their menstruation to priests as if it were a sin, as Gerty did.

In Nausica, Joyce gives us a portrait of a woman who is shaped by the gender expectations of the Church and the non-stop machinery of modern consumer culture. These confining forces, reflected in the confining prose, contribute to a system that won't acknowledge Gerty's pain, won't allow her tools to truthfully handle her body, and allows her to be visually consumed and subsequently dismissed by Bloom. However, Gerty's reappearance in "Circe" momentarily subverts these forces, and, importantly, her menstrual blood is her weapon. In doing so, Joyce allows Gerty to use menstruation, the

biological reality which is most quintessentially feminine, to resist and ironize the violence done to her by virtue of her gender.

In "Circe," Gerty performs a heightened, perverted version of herself and a stripped-down, absurdist version of the events and themes of "Nausica." Gerty's first line in "Circe" is a misquotation of the groom's script for a Catholic marriage ceremony; she says "With all my worldly goods I thee and thou." (361). Her bungling of a religious, male script is a further perversion of her tie to the Virgin Mary and a further indictment of the way that Gerty constructs her narrative using borrowed, inappropriate texts and language. However, most jolting is the fact that Gerty does not hold a ring, but her own menstrual blood to perform the marriage ceremony. The absurdity of the scene and its conflation of the many themes of "Nausica" resist easy understanding and consumption, and in doing so Gerty has resisted our easy understanding and consumption.

The sly peek-a-boo essence of her interaction with Bloom is also imitated and subverted in "Circe." For example, in the same coy way that she exposed herself to Bloom in Nausica, she now "shows coyly her bloodied clout"(361), forcing him to confront biological realities of what lays behind her feminine identity and subsequent easy consumption. This perverted, sensationalized retelling of Nausica forces both Bloom and a reader to confront what has been stifled or only subtly explored in Gerty's "Nausica."

Furthermore, in "Nausica," Gerty's code of appropriateness only allowed her to partially and untruthfully engage with her own body; though she was willing to explore those parts of herself that made her attractive to the social, male gaze, she was unequipped to acknowledge parts of her body that are socially deemed ugly or

inappropriate, like menstruation. But in "Circe," Gerty's compartmentalized version of her body breaks down. For example, Gerty tells Bloom in reference to her menstruation, "You did that…When you saw all the secrets of my bottom drawer." (361). Her words imply a cause and effect relationship; as if her sexual episode with Bloom forced her to recognize the whole of her body, not just superficial elements that make her attractive to Bloom. This inability to omit the ugly realities of the body when confronting the sexualized body is essential to Joyce's crusade against unrealistic, untruthful and harming idealizations of women.

Complicating Gerty's act of subversion in "Circe" is its situation as a hallucination; though readers are allowed to witness this act, the Gerty Macdowell of "Nausica" never actually confronts Bloom. However, the fact that Gerty's act of resistance exists in the imaginary realm only further emphasizes Gerty's actual confinement.

Molly's account of menstruation in "Penelope" acts as foil to Gerty's stifled portrayal in "Nausica," and over-the-top portrayal in "Circe," but simultaneously operates in much the same way and toward the same end as these other depictions; just as Gerty's menstruation in "Nausica" punctuated and punctured her insistence on a sentimental unreality, Molly's menstruation in "Penelope" operates as a punctuation of her candid remarks by further emphasizing the reality of her body and real bodily desires. This realism, epitomized in phrases like "I bet the cat itself is better off that us have we too much blood up in us" and "its pouring out of me like the sea" (633), forces readers to confront their own comfort level with discussions of the body. Molly never waves her bloody clout in the face of many men who fantasize about her, but her frankness about

her menstruation is just as shocking and complicating; Joyce therefore sensationalizes menstruation by merely normalizing it and situating it as the ordinary occurrence that it is.

The above is mirrored in Molly's narrative prose. Unlike Gerty's third person narrative that is suspiciously encroached upon by external forces, Molly's fluid, slippery prose cannot even be bounded by punctuation and standardized grammar. This is not to suggest that Molly doesn't suffer from confining, gendered expectations – in fact, Molly, like Gerty, mentions beauty products like "antifat" pills and "skin lotion" (618) in conjunction with a consideration of her body – only that this is Joyce's textual depiction of a space that allows honest engagement with the body.

As a bodily reality, Molly's account of menstruation operates in the same way as portrayals of other bodily realities throughout the novel: it ironizes and punctures that which is too inflated or ideal. For example, at one point Bloom recounts a memory of him and Molly at the opera. He explains that, "She looked fine…Told her what Spinoza says in that book of poor papa's. Hypnotized, listening. Eyes like that."(233). However, we learn from Molly that the posturing of her body was motivated by the onset of menstruation. She explains, "I smiled the best I could all in a swamp leaning forward as if I was interested"(633). This portrait not only qualifies the feminine ideal by introducing the realities of menstruation, but also qualifies idealized memories and interpersonal relationships. However, like Gerty's resistance in "Circe," Molly's puncturing of Bloom's self-heroic memory is complicated because Molly does not actually express the above to Bloom. Yet, this is an important moment nonetheless; the dramatic irony produced by the two very different accounts of the same episode is essential to the

ultimate aims a novel that explores the tragi-comedy of the human condition. Significantly, this irony is brought on by the bodily realities that are so often ignored.

In normalizing menstruation, Joyce also rightfully portrays it as a life experience with a temporal quality. Both Bloom and Molly use menstruation to access the past. For example, as Molly starts to menstruate, her mind wanders to previous episodes of menstruation. Similarly, when Bloom considers the possibility of Gerty menstruating, his mind momentarily latches on to his past, intimate experiences with menstruation, commenting that "Sometimes Milly and Molly together."(301). Bloom's knowledge about Milly and Molly's menstrual cycles only results from the type of intimacy that *Ulysses* ultimately celebrates; this phrase reveals that the intimacy that keeps Molly and Bloom together is grounded in an awareness and familiarity with each other's bodies, menstruation and all.

This sentiment is echoed in one of Bloom's poems to Molly, as recounted by Molly in "Penelope." It reads, "Precious one everything connected with your Glorious Body everything underlined that comes from it is a thing of beauty and joy for ever"(634). This sentiment is crucial to understanding Joyce's portrait of true intimacy. As opposed to sentimental love that operates within the parameters of greater social acceptability, for Joyce, true intimacy is an acceptance and celebration of "everything underlined" connected to the body, even that which is deemed ugly or vulgar. Further evidence of the aforementioned is Joyce's own erotic love letters to his wife, Nora, which similarly celebrate the real-ness of bodies being intimate. So bodily realities not only serve to puncture and problematize inflations or idealizations, but once recognized and accepted, also offer the avenues to true intimacy.

In “Circe,” Joyce sensationalizes menstruation by his extreme depiction and in “Penelope” he sensationalizes menstruation by revealing its ordinariness. Both portrayals problematize a reader’s understanding of gender and allow a space to consider femininity, violence, and intimacy.