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The Domestic Interior, the Female Body, and the Metaphorical Irish Nation in the Works of James Joyce

Ellen Scheible

The divided island that houses the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland is the birthplace of some of the most prolific and powerful western writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most Irish Studies critics agree that Ireland’s literary genius emerged most aggressively during the period of change that ultimately led to Irish independence and the partition of the island in the early twentieth century. Before the Irish famine in the middle of the nineteenth century, Ireland was a British colony on the edge of a progressive, modern economy that promised to bring great prosperity for Anglo-Irish landowners and British absentee landlords. After the famine, Ireland was left destitute, losing any claim to the modernity that seemed inevitable in the beginning of the nineteenth century. Consequently, Irish Catholicism and Nationalism developed as powerful cultural agents that sought to rebuild the nation through the commodification of tradition rather than the forces of European modernity. However, this new, fetishized, Catholic nationalism produced its own modernizing momentum. The Ireland that surfaced in 1922 became a nation of halves: politically, one part of a partitioned island and culturally, an idea contingent on the conflicted binary of modernist aesthetics and Irish national tradition.

modern and contemporary Irish fiction is saturated with metaphors of location that confront, challenge, and often reconstruct both the geographical public sphere and the domestic private sphere that frame Irish life in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In many of my courses, students read Irish literature that either gestures towards the 1922 partition of the nation or confronts partition as a defining aspect of Irishness. To be Irish is to be divided. Partition and the consequent hybridity of Ireland as a nation that is both modern and traditional functions as an underlying metaphor. Within this metaphor gender identities fall victim to the ambiguity of hybridity: gender that is both traditional and progressive is only imaginable on bodies that are othered. We focus particularly on the role of women and the female body as significant figures in the ongoing struggle to construct a national image of Irish culture. The female body emerges as one version of otherness in its over-sexualized but virginal place in Irish culture. Structures such as the Anglo-Irish Big House and the Magdalene Asylums
serve as spaces of oppression where the female body is both domesticated and repressed as a sexually reproductive vessel. Such spaces represent the need for the domestic interior to control any feminized threat to the newly formed version of Irishness that depended so heavily on a violent and dominating nationalism and, by extension, a newly formed postcolonial “manhood.”

The private/public binary reflects political space, too. “Home-making” and “nation-making” become intertwined ideologies in many of the texts that we read and they are transposed onto the female body as a reproductive agent. The body both regulates the domestic interior of the Irish family and produces the independent, postcolonial traditional Irish masculine culture and by the sexual repression of the Church. There are few places where the uses of the domestic interior theme are more potent than in the works of James Joyce (1882-1941).

Joyce wrote *Ulysses*, his opus novel, both before Irish independence, and after 1916, during the process of decolonization that resulted in the Irish Free State. Images of bodies partitioned by otherness or bodies that signify as duplicitous wholes appear often in his texts, suggesting that Joyce, along with many twentieth-century postcolonial Irish writers both before and after national independence, imagined nationhood through the lens of a bifurcated identity. In *Ulysses*, the disabled female body is a source of traumatic confrontation for an alienated and emasculated Ireland, a nation dreaming of wholeness and manhood.

Here, we might find relevance in the work of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901–81), whose concept called “the Mirror Stage” shows how, as children, we become alienated and othered within ourselves. This is the moment, he argued, when a child realizes she is not the person in the mirror being held by her parent; that she and the mirror image are different. A nation functions under the same principle. What Lacan says about self-consciousness (that we are all alienated, othered, split within ourselves) is also inherent to Ireland as a nation. Ireland (like, perhaps, all nations) functions in a state of hybridity. Writing in an historical era when psychoanalysis redefined the meaning of subjectivity, Joyce’s texts resonate with these concepts. For Joyce, and Ireland, wholeness is elusive and unification an impossibility. In *Ulysses*, it is through a kind of mirror stage, whenever the male gaze meets the female body, that Joyce imagines a national identity based on non-unification, an Ireland that is essentially divided.

In the “Nausicaa” episode of *Ulysses*, the main character, Leopold Bloom, takes a break from his walk around Dublin to rest on the beach where he encounters a beautiful young woman named Gerty MacDowell. After a very public expression of sexual desire, Gerty leaves the beach and Bloom realizes that she walks with a limp and is permanently disabled. Beyond Joyce’s descriptions of Gerty as an image of the Irish nationalism had to invent its own history in order to propagate the version of the future that it so desperately wanted to attain.
Virgin Mary and Irish girlhood, Joyce also imagines Gerty’s hybridized body as an image of domestic Ireland. When Bloom later sees Gerty on the beach, he desperately lusts for her, but then realizes that her body is disabled and her mobility limited. Gerty’s disability functions as a suppressed or hidden aspect of her identity throughout “Nausicaa” and comes as a surprise to Bloom. “Tight boots? No. She’s lame! O!” (page 13, line 771) He suddenly recognizes the obstacles hindering unification—both his unification with Gerty and the nation’s political unification.

In his 1994 book *The Subaltern Ulysses*, Enda Duffy persuasively argues that women, both as activists during the Irish anticolonial revolution and as characters in modernist texts, emerged as “key signifiers of the nation itself in the representational economy of the revolution.” However, he points out, “it was only as lone figures (in masculinist narratives) that they were allowed to suggest the new nation” (167). Duffy’s argument posits the female figures in Joyce’s novel, specifically Molly Bloom (Leopold’s wife), as the figures through which Joyce questions the future of the Irish nation and the unity inherent in national identity. We can read Gerty MacDowell as a figure of national identity in much the same way that Duffy reads Molly Bloom of the working class that surface in the first half. The gendered division of labor that Duffy identifies as part of the colonial regime in the novel’s first half, where working-class women are symbols of the subaltern, is transformed into a representation of economic abjection in the second half. Duffy’s goal is to seek moments of “postcolonial subjectivity” in *Ulysses*, hoping to identify the “utopian potential of the text” and he argues that we “can hardly hope that the male-centered realist narrative, copied from models that celebrated an imperialist nationalist world, will prove an appropriate vehicle” (170-71). Hence, we are left with female characters as possible figures for a future community. But Duffy does not see such a community surface in *Ulysses*, instead the novel “poses the more difficult question of what such a community might imply” (171).

The implications of such a community lie in the projections of an original, communal unification that postcolonial bodies and groups of bodies, or nations, must reject because they are fictions of nationhood proliferated as truths by an imperial culture. In other words, postcolonial subjectivity must undergo a mirror stage where it recognizes the impossibility of unified nationhood implicit in its development and recognition as a nation. Because women are the most obvious subaltern subjects in Duffy’s reading of *Ulysses*, it is through the female characters that we are forced to ask if “unity can be imagined in any real sense at the moment of anticolonial revolution” (172). In Duffy’s analysis, the birth of the Irish Free State is coterminous with a postcolonial redefinition of nationhood that rejects unity as its founding principle. For him (and Joyce), Irish independence inherently demands division and disunity. Irishness depends on more than an aesthetic reflection in the cracked looking glass of a servant (Joyce’s famous description of Irish identity); it depends on the recognition that a looking glass without a crack is a false image of national unity.

The crack in Leopold Bloom’s looking glass is Gerty MacDowell. In the opening pages of “Nausicaa,” when we are safely housed inside of the domestic interior, Gerty is not only “as fair a specimen of winsome Irish girlhood as one could wish to see,” but she also possesses eyes of “the bluest Irish blue” and, when she blushes, she looks “so lovely in her sweet girlish shyness that of a surety God’s fair land of Ireland did not hold her equal” (*Ulysses* 13.81, 13.108, 13.121-22). In Gerty’s own mind, and arguably Bloom’s, she exists as the trademark image of a feminized and aesthetically perfected Ireland, where consumer culture and sentimental novels have yoked Irishness with youth, girlish beauty, and the expansiveness of God’s country. Gerty is Ireland’s perfect, complete symbol—that is, except for “that one

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shortcoming” (13.650) that she “always tried to conceal” (13.651); the “accident” that, when conjured, reminded her that “the years were slipping by” (13.649) and no longer was she a girl, winsome and shy, with an idealized sense of perpetual youth. Gerty tricks herself into believing in her perfection in “Nausicaa” by trusting the mirror that reflects it: “She did it up all by herself and what joy was hers when she tried it on then, smiling at the lovely reflection which the mirror gave back to her!” (13.161-62). Even when Gerty succumbs to the “gnawing sorrow” that “is there all the time” (13.188-89), her insecurities are mediated by the mirror. Gerty’s reflection in the mirror speaks to her, reassuring her of the existence of herself as a unified and complete being, lovely in its perfect wholeness.

From the onset of Gerty’s episode in Ulysses, the use of the mirror as a symbol of infinite duplicity collides with images of national duplicity and divided Irishness, positioning the female, incomplete in both body and image, as the locus for national disruption. Right before Bloom wishes he could be “the rock she sat on,” he ruminates on seeing the Howth peninsula, and by extension Ireland, in the distance: “An optical illusion. Mirage. Land of the setting sun this. Homerule sun setting in the southeast. My native land, goodnight” (13.1076-1080). In Bloom’s thoughts, his desire overlaps with his identification of the land where he is standing as the nation on which the ‘homerule sun’ finally set. It is after his voyeuristic confrontation with Gerty that Bloom says goodnight to his ‘native land,’ seeing the duplicity in both woman and land as the markers of the end of the colony, where home rule is only an option when the nation is nonexistent.

Bloom’s role as a flaneur and voyeur on the streets of Dublin traces a city that will soon birth the revolution leading to the Irish Free State. If we follow this image of the male body as the generator of national identity through Joyce’s texts, we see it reemerge, particularly in his last novel, Finnegans Wake (1939). HCE, the main male character in Finnegans Wake, like Ulysses’s Bloom, commits a sexual transgression, the importance of which relies on female recognition of the offense, and his broken body then becomes the text’s personified map of Dublin. In Joyce’s novels, as in much of twentieth-century Irish fiction, the partitioned nation is unimaginable without a fragmented and cracked body conjured in the mirror of female duplicity.

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