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Forging the Unborn Humor of My Race: Comic Patriarchy in *Ulysses* and *The Snapper*

by Rob Cannata

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James Joyce’s *Ulysses* delves deeply into the father-son relationship, ruthlessly probing its political, religious, and social aspects. Fatherhood is often revered, but *Ulysses*, in its ever-undulating methodology, parodies the august, “majestic” position of the patriarch. Alongside poignant observations about the spirit of fatherhood in Irish culture, a keen mockery of this same spirit exists. In the trials of critical history, Joyce’s more serious musings have been dwelt upon, while the mine of humorous observation and mockery of fatherhood in *Ulysses* has been relatively unexplored. Thus, the seriocomic dualism of Irish fatherhood is often missed in Joyce, as well as in other Irish writers.

One such writer is Roddy Doyle, whose Jimmy Rabbitte Sr., father figure of *The Snapper*, is a walking parody and in some ways a contemporary version of Joyce’s Leopold Bloom. Unfortunately, much as Joyce criticism dwells too heavily on the serious and contemplative, Doyle criticism often focuses on the light-hearted and comic. Again, the seriocomic duality is missed. In Doyle’s case, the misjudgment of tone comes about because critics are too well acclimated to the “stage Irishman” stereotype, which Jimmy seems to mimic. A drunken, boisterous
fellow with a witty tongue and a lack of personal responsibility, the stage Irishman is often employed as a farcical comic gag in English and American literature; examples range from the befuddled minor character Pat in Fanny Fern’s *Ruth Hall* to the manic, half-crazed Stephen in the movie *Braveheart*. In both Joyce and Doyle, however, there is a deeper element to the concept of the Irish father that is often overlooked.

There exists a duality in the Irish portrayal of the father figure in which he can be both a character of comedy and drama at the same time. This duality is often lost due to the stereotypical perception of the stage Irishman. While the stage Irishman is not necessarily a father figure, the image of a drunk, irresponsible Irish father is familiar enough in the common imagination that the stereotypes are often interchangeable. Both the roots of the Irish fatherhood stereotype-and the authors’ character development beyond it—is displayed in these two novels, providing a more sophisticated, more honest take on a laughable stereotype and its deeper function in Irish literature.

The stereotype of the stage Irishman is most overtly displayed in *The Snapper*, so we will begin here. Doyle relies heavily on dialogue in his novel, so we are more attuned to Jimmy Rabbitte’s words than his inner thoughts. A brazen, working-class plasterer living in the fictional Barrytown, Jimmy has a blunt, obscenity-peppered sense of family communication:

"Jimmy Jr came in, from work.
--Howyis, he said.
--Get stuffed, you, said Jimmy Sr.
--Manners! said Veronica.
--Listen here, you, said Jimmy Sr. --You’re not to be drinkin’ all the Coke in the mornin’, righ’. Buy your own.
--I put me money into the house, said Jimmy Jr.
--Is tha’ wha’ yeh call it? Yeh couldn’t wipe your arse with the amount you give your mother” (Doyle 163).

While authoritative in a loud, demanding sense, Rabbitte’s sense of humor makes the audience accept crudity as his defining trait, as well as the defining trait of his social class. Taken out of the context of the novel, Rabbitte seems to be a flat, though entertaining personality. Many readers take Jimmy at face value. One review of Doyle’s *The Snapper* reads, “Many have argued that the series portrayed the working-class Irish as foul-mouthed, illiterate alcoholics and fostered negative cultural stereotypes” (“Roddy Doyle 1958-”).

Doyle could have easily settled for an uproariously funny story with a character like Jimmy, but Jimmy’s deeper, quieter qualities gradually unfold through the course of the book. In many ways, Jimmy realizes that he is playing the role of a stubborn, irresponsible Irishman to his own family during a family in the novel. His daughter Sharon is as stubborn as he and refuses to acknowledge the stress she brings to the Rabbitte family when she becomes illegitimately pregnant. Sick of arguing, Jimmy gives her the childish, pouting, silent treatment. “Jimmy Sr knew he could snap out of it but he didn’t want to. He was doing it on purpose. He was protesting; that was how he described it to himself” (Doyle 280).

Jimmy’s initial flatness now reveals a deeper level of self-awareness, but despite this he still refuses to act like a responsible father and address the situation.

Not only is this situation comic, but also serves as a pivot for the novel itself. Jimmy’s self-establishment as the wise-cracking, unmoving, rollicking pubber comes under fire because of the strain of his daughter’s pregnancy. In his review “Eating Jesus,” Andrew O’Hagan puts it well: “The real centre of *The Snapper* is the point where Jimmy has to decide which of two loyalties means most to him: loyalty to his daughter, who’s ‘up the pole’, or loyalty to his sense
of himself, to the old-fashioned kind of man
he has been until now.”

_The Snapper_ now becomes a refutation of typical stage Irish fatherhood because Jimmy eventually breaks out of his comfortable, stereotypical shell and embraces the new reality his family faces: “He was a changed man, a new man. That trouble a while back with Sharon had given him an awful fright...There was more to life than drinking pints with your mates. There was Veronica, his wife, and his children” (Doyle 320). If Jimmy Rabbitte—the ultimate expression of stage Irish fatherhood—can be changed by experience, then the stage Irishman takes on a new complexity. Rabbitte is an object of ridicule for his stereotypical humor, but underneath is every bit as complex as the rest of the characters in the novel and fulfills a major dramatic purpose within the plot.

In _Ulysses_, unlike _The Snapper_, each major character plays several roles and takes on a variety of mindsets, archetypes, and self-conceptions. In this sea of personalities, the duality of the Irish father is also apparent. Joyce’s depiction differs, however, because the duality of Irish fatherhood is divided into two figures: Simon Dedalus—biological father of Stephen Dedalus—and Leopold Bloom, who acts as a spiritual father to Stephen later in the novel.

Simon Dedalus’s place in Joyce’s _A Portrait of the Artists as a Young Man_ is somewhat serious, but in _Ulysses_ he becomes much more of a comic character. Zack Bowen states in _Ulysses as a Comic Novel_, “(Simon’s) aphorisms, his clichés, his exaggerated and comic sense of his own tragic dilemmas, his bombastic railing at his in-laws, and his generally lackadaisical attitude regarding the financial...support of his family...make Simon a classic comic character” (8). Simon remains a fairly stereotypical stage Irishman. He mutters about his son’s folly, is curt with his family, and has the spark of storytelling and humor in him that becomes the envy of Leopold Bloom. Simon’s comic sense leaks through in the mannerisms of his son. Stephen Dedalus is fiercely independent of his father, but his father’s wit and droll sense of humor help him understand Irish culture on a deeper, more personable level. Also, Simon’s humor helps Stephen recognize the irregularity of life, or, as Bowen puts it “Fathers...it seems, provide a basis for coping with reality rather than spiritual dilemmas” (9).

Leopold Bloom becomes something of a spiritual father figure for Stephen. As Helmut Bonheim states in _Joyce’s Benefactions: Perspectives in Criticism_, “Bloom expresses, in action as in imagination, a sympathy for others which Stephen rarely exercises, although Stephen sometimes feels such sympathy...” (18). Bloom becomes something of a reaction for Stephen against Simon’s irresponsible, flair-filled fatherhood. Bloom is patient, kind, and impotent in his ability to degrade, insult, or compete with Stephen as Simon does on numerous occasions. Thus, Stephen accepts him as a temporary surrogate, if only at arm’s length (Bonheim 24).

The problem with Bloom is that he seems nearly the opposite of the fiery, cuss-filled stage Irishman. With his gentle manner, thought-out actions, and complete lack of social prowess, he seems the opposite of the Irish stereotypes we have seen so far. How, then, does he contribute to a discussion about the dualities of an archetype if he doesn’t exhibit the archetype himself?

To understand the synchronicity between the two works and their complication of the stage Irish fatherhood, we need to see the novels in the light of fatherhood instead of the fathers themselves. Sharon Rabbitte seems to be under the hilarious tyranny of her father, until Jimmy’s style of parenting is altered. Thus, the style of fatherhood exhibited in _The Snapper_ passes from trivial
to substantial, comic to seriocomic, with
the passage of time. Likewise, as Bloom
begins to take on a fathering role, Stephen
has a similar progression, as his concept
of what a father is (and can be) changes
throughout the course of *Ulysses*. Simon is
stuck in his ways, and his estrangement from
Stephen makes any progress and reconcilia-
tion unlikely. Thus, Joyce refutes the typical
fatherhood stereotype with Bloom, a char-
acter with a more humanitarian parenting
approach. The duality of seriocomic Irish
fatherhood is intact, simply broken into two
equally comic voices.

While dark-clad, mousy Bloom
doesn’t seem to be outwardly funny, our
privileged glances into the inner quirkiness
of his mind reveal a character that is argu-
ably funnier than Simon. Take, for example,
Bloom wondering on whether statues of
Greek goddesses, who ate only ambrosia
and nectar, need a working anus:

> Lovely forms of women sculpted Junoian. Immor-
tal lovely. And we stuffing food in one hole and out
behind: food, chyle, blood, dung, earth, food: have to
feed it like stoking an engine. They have no. Never
looked. I’ll look today. Keeper won’t see. Bend down
let something drop. See if she (Joyce 145).

While Bloom’s peculiar views bring him
into a line of strange reasoning, his consider-
atation of the human frustration with the filth
of our own bodies is instantly relatable and
funny.

Bloom, though not outwardly a stage
Irish father, does not escape the mockery
often leveled at one. Bloom is endlessly
mocked throughout the novel, much as
Jimmy Rabbitte is mocked by his mates
and family. Simon, who is usually doing the
mocking, is still mocked by his daughter
Boody: “Our father who art not in heaven.”
(Joyce 186). Bloom bears the brunt of mock-
ery *Ulysses* due to his reserved, eccentric
nature, and his constant self-mockery and
-deprecation.

During the carriage ride in the
“Hades” episode, Bloom’s inept verbal
skills surface, opening him to mockery.
He stumbles through the story of Reuben
J. Dodd, a Dubliner whose son attempted
suicide. A Liffey boatman fished Dodd’s son
out of the water, and Reuben gave the man a
florin tip for the trouble. Bloom’s awkward
verbal manner ruins the story so badly that
his friend Martin Cunningham feels obliged
to take over half-way through to increase the
pace and reach the comic effect expected.
Even after this, Simon’s comment, “One and
eightpence too much” (Joyce 78), dwarfs the
funny story that Bloom had tried to initiate.
Bloom’s awareness of his own ineptness,
and his attempts to overcome it, provide a
realm of mockery unique to his personality
(Maddox 138). This is similar to Jimmy’s
self-awareness of playing a specific role: both
Bloom and Jimmy are playing a type
of fool and know it, which opens them to
change and complication.

The question arises: Why continue
the comic trend? Would it not be easier to
refute Simon with a directly compassionate
figure, who, though less entertaining than
bumbling Bloom, would better delineate
the change from frivolous to meaningful?
Bloom is necessary because the comic sense
in *Ulysses* highlights a foundational tenet of
the novel. As Zack Bowen states in *Ulysses
as a Comic Novel*, “The comic universe is
defined by senseless turns of events trans-
formed by artistry into a sort of drollery, a
world where the plights of the characters
invite instant, everyday identification and
where the crude and the sublime exist side
by side” (10).

The chance meetings of the char-
acters over the course of the day are just
that--chance--and any congruity is the cre-
ation of the reader. Ironically, only the con-
stant comic assertion that life is incongruous
gives some congruity to the work. Inherent
in comedy is the assumption of frustration--
that life is incongruous and will not give full bearing to mankind’s best-laid plans. Pure success just isn’t funny.

The stage Irish father, in the hands of Irish writers, becomes a powerful tool to show that behind the frivolity commonly associated with Irish culture, serious change can occur. The comedy and parody is a way of coping with the slippery nature of the world: a means for change, not an end. Considering the oppression suffered by the Irish in their centuries of British occupation, this coping mechanism became necessary to preserve some sense of fulfillment in dire times. This coping mechanism is not exclusive to Ireland. In my developing Honors Thesis, I will explore the use of humor and linguistic manipulation by southern “redneck” American and African-American cultures. Despite vast differences in history and culture, these societies share a common bond in that they were subjected to immersion of the English language—a language that reminded them of the British/Anglo-Saxon dominance in their past—and were misrepresented by derogatory stereotypes that they incorporated into their cultural identities.

In *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. discusses the concept of “Signifyin(g)” in African-American literature. The theory of Signifyin(g) will be part of the lens which frames my larger thesis. Signifyin(g) is a rhetorical practice in which African-Americans, under the linguistic immersion of English, transform common English phrases and words into a separate meaning. Slaves crafted phrases that would have one meaning to their white overseers, but would have an encoded, very different message among their fellow slaves. This “double-talk” allowed slaves to communicate—and cope—in exclusivity within the language of their oppressors. This extends to the Irish question because the Irish, like African slaves, had stopped common use of their indigenous language, and likewise had to “signify” English into their own set of meanings. Doyle makes the connection in his novel *The Commitments*, quipping, “The Irish are the niggers of Europe.” The literary transmogrification of the stage Irishman is one representative of this process, wherein an insulting, deprecating stereotype is turned into a source of power through humorous self-observation.

While Jimmy Rabbitte and Simon Dedalus seem at first to support the Irish fatherhood stereotype, it is the recognition and complication of the stereotype that helps Joyce and Doyle express the depth within it. By highlighting the tragic and comic in this originally negative archetype, the Irish undermine the power of the insult, and use it to strengthen their sense of cultural identity, turning the swords of their overseers into ploughshares of their own.

**Works Cited**


