



# Ulysses

James Joyce  
(1922)

## PLOT

The whole novel takes place on a single day, Thursday, June 16, 1904, which was special to Joyce because it was the day that Nora Barnacle, his future wife, made her love clear to him. During the course of this day, **three main characters wake up, have various encounters in Dublin and go to sleep eighteen hours later.** The central character, Leopold Bloom, a middle-aged advertising canvasser and non-practicing Jew, is Joyce's common man. He leaves his home at eight o'clock to buy his breakfast and returns finally at two the following morning; in the hours in-between, he lands on the shores of many streets, attends a funeral, endures misadventures and delight. **During his wanderings, Bloom meets Stephen Dedalus**, who is the alienated protagonist of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and who becomes, momentarily, his adopted son: the alienated common man rescues the alienated artist from a brothel, and takes him home where the paralysis of their fatigue prevents them from achieving a personal communion. Finally, there is Bloom's wife, Molly, a voluptuous singer who is planning an afternoon of adultery with her music director.

## SETTING

*Ulysses* is the climax of Joyce's creativity and sums up the themes and techniques he had developed in his previous works. It was designed as a **detailed account of ordinary life on an ordinary Dublin day** and Joyce planned each movement of each character on each street as though he were playing chess. He placed them in houses he knew, drinking in pubs he had frequented, walking on cobblestones he retraced. He made the very air of Dublin, the atmosphere, the feeling, the place, almost indistinguishable, certainly inseparable, from his human characters. Consequently, **Dublin becomes itself a character in this novel.**

## THE RELATION TO THE ODYSSEY

As its title suggests, *Ulysses* is related to Homer's great epic the *Odyssey*, the tale of Ulysses and his travels after the Trojan War. Joyce used **the Odyssey as a structural framework for his book**, arranging its characters and events around Homer's heroic model, with **Bloom as Ulysses, Stephen as his son Telemachus and Molly as the faithful Penelope.**

*Ulysses* is divided into three parts and eighteen episodes, as its chapters are usually called: 'Telemachiad' (chapters 1-3), 'Odyssey' (chapters 4-15), 'Nostos' (chapters 16-18), embodying the three main characters, and imitating the three parts of the *Odyssey*. While the Homeric parallels

are the most important structural device in the novel, each chapter is additionally organised around a different hour, a colour, an organ of the body, a sense, a symbol, a narrative technique suitable for the subject-matter.

## THEMES

**Stephen Dedalus, Mr Bloom and Mrs Bloom** are more than individuals: they **represent two aspects of human nature.** **Stephen is pure intellect** and embodies every young man seeking maturity; in his stream of consciousness, usually stimulated by sense impressions, he associates things by resemblance. **Mrs Bloom stands for flesh**, since she identifies herself totally with her sensual nature and fecundity; her train of thought, while she is lying in the darkness at night, is carried on by her own memories, one triggering another by a kind of association which is simply literal (for example one man in her life reminds her of another). **Mr Bloom**, uniting the extremes, **is everybody**, the whole of mankind; in his stream of consciousness things are linked by cause and effect or by being near in space and time.

**The theme of the novel**, implied by the quest or journey, is **moral**: human life means suffering, falling but also struggling to rise and seek the good.

## STYLE

*Ulysses* is famous for many things, from its complex structure to its difficulty, from its brilliantly realised characters to its obscenities; but what really marks it is its revolutionary prose. In fact, Joyce combined several methods to present a variety of matters. **The stream of consciousness technique; the cinematic technique**, with the literary equivalents of close-ups, flashbacks, tracking shots, suspension of speech; **question and answer; dramatic dialogue** and **the juxtaposition of events**, with the consequent construction of order and unity from their randomness, **enabled the writer to render his characters' inner life creating the so-called 'collage technique'**, quite similar to the techniques used by the cubist artists who depicted a scene from all perspectives.

In *Ulysses* Joyce brought to perfection the interior monologue employing two levels of narration, one external to the character's mind and the other internal, and the one with only the mind level of narration.

The language used is rich in puns, images, contrasts, paradoxes, juxtapositions, interruptions, false clues, and symbols; the range of vocabulary and registers is amazing, moreover in almost every episode slang, catchphrases, nicknames, even expressions taken from advertising are present and used to voice the unspoken activity of the mind. Foreign words, literary quotations and allusions to other texts are other important linguistic features.



<b>Key idea</b>	Joyce's <i>Ulysses</i> is a new form of prose based on 'the mythical method', resulting from the progress made by psychology, ethnology and anthropology, rather than on the 'narrative method'.	myth was used to enlarge by resemblance and difference the actions and people of a Dublin day, to give them another dimension and to express the universal in the particular. Joyce, however, called his work a 'novel' declaring he wanted to write a 'modern epic in prose'. In fact, in <i>Ulysses</i> he achieved a new form of realism.
<b>The mythical method</b>	This allowed the author to make a parallel with the <i>Odyssey</i> and provides the book with a symbolic, cross-temporal meaning; Homer's	

## COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

### 1 READ the texts and answer the following questions.

- What are the main events of the novel?
- In what sense is Dublin a character in the novel?
- How is *Ulysses* related to the *Odyssey*?
- Who are the three main characters and what do they represent?
- Where does *Ulysses* complex structure derive from?
- What does the mythical method allow the writer to make?



## The funeral

*The time is 11 a.m. Bloom and his fellow mourners travel by coach behind Paddy Dignam's coffin to Prospects Cemetery. The ritual of burial evokes in him a multitude of thoughts on death and human frailty. The elegant Martin Cunningham is the first to get into the carriage, followed by Power, Simon Dedalus and Bloom. The carriage drives off, slowly at first, then faster, through the Dublin streets; finally, it reaches the burial ground, with its dark trees and its white monuments. All the passengers dismount and pass among the other mourners to the service. They talk of mundane matters like insurance and mutual friends. Bloom listens to the service with his usual lively interest in church matters; then he joins the mourners in the procession to the grave.*

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Part II, Episode 6, Hades

Mr Bloom stood far back, his hat in his hand, counting the bared heads<sup>1</sup>. Twelve. I'm thirteen. No. The chap in the macintosh is thirteen. Death's number. Where the deuce did he pop out of?<sup>2</sup> He wasn't in the chapel, that I'll swear. Silly superstition that about thirteen.

- 5 Nice soft tweed Ned Lambert has in that suit. Tinge of purple<sup>3</sup>. I had one like that when we lived in Lombard street west. Dressy fellow he was once<sup>4</sup>. Used to change three suits in the day. Must get that grey suit of mine turned by Mesias<sup>5</sup>. Hello. It's dyed<sup>6</sup>. His wife I forgot he's not married or his landlady ought to have picked out those threads for him<sup>7</sup>.

- 10 The coffin dived out of sight<sup>8</sup>, eased down by the men straddled on the gravetrestles<sup>9</sup>. They struggled up and out<sup>10</sup>: and all uncovered<sup>11</sup>. Twenty.

Pause.

If we were all suddenly somebody else.

Far away a donkey brayed<sup>12</sup>. Rain. No such ass. Never see a dead one<sup>13</sup>, they say.

- 15 Shame of death. They hide. Also poor papa went away.

1 bared heads. Teste scoperte.

2 Where ... of? Da dove diavolo è uscito?

3 Tinge of purple. Un'ombra di violetto.

4 Dressy ... once. Una volta era un elegantone.

5 Must ... Mesias. Devo far rivoltare da Mesias quel mio completo grigio.

6 It's dyed. È tinto.

7 ought to ... for him. Avrebbero dovuto riprendergli quei fili.

8 The coffin dived out of sight. La bara scomparve.

9 eased down ... gravetrestles. Fatta scivolare giù dagli uomini a gambe spalancate sopra le assi gettate sulla fossa.

10 They struggled up and out. Si rialzarono scostandosi a fatica.

11 all uncovered. Tutti si scoprirono.

12 brayed. Ragliò.

13 Never see a dead one. Non se ne vede mai uno morto.



Gentle sweet air blew round the bared heads in a **whisper**. **Whisper**. The boy by the **gravehead** held his wreath<sup>14</sup> with both hands staring quietly in the black open space. Mr Bloom moved behind the portly kindly caretaker<sup>15</sup>. Well cut frockcoat<sup>16</sup>. Weighing them up perhaps to see which will go next<sup>17</sup>. Well it is a long rest. Feel no more. It's the moment you feel. Must be damned unpleasant. Can't believe it at first. Mistake must be: someone else. Try the house opposite. Wait, I wanted to. I haven't yet. Then darkened deathchamber<sup>18</sup>. Light they want. Whispering around you. Would you like to see a priest? Then rambling and wandering<sup>19</sup>. Delirium all you hid all your life. The death struggle. His sleep is not natural. Press his lower eyelid. Watching is his nose pointed is his jaw sinking are the soles of his feet yellow<sup>20</sup>. Pull the pillow away<sup>21</sup> and finish it off on the floor since he's doomed<sup>22</sup>. Devil in that picture of sinner's death showing him a woman. Dying to embrace her in his shirt.

14 **wreath**. Corona.

15 **moved ... caretaker**. Si portò dietro al corpulento bonario becchino.

16 **Well cut frockcoat**. Frac ben tagliato.

17 **Weighing ... go next**. Li soppesa con lo sguardo per vedere chi se ne andrà per primo.

18 **deathchamber**. Camera ardente.

19 **rambling and wandering**. Vagante

e incerto.

20 **Watching ... yellow**. Guardare se il naso è affilato, la mascella è rilassata, le piante dei piedi sono gialle.

21 **Pull the pillow away**. Tirare via il cuscino.

22 **finish ... doomed**. Lasciarlo finire per terra poiché è condannato.

## LITERARY COMPETENCE

### VOCABULARY

**1 READ** the extract and match the highlighted words with their meaning.

- 1 I'll make a solemn promise .....
- 2 stupid .....
- 3 memorial .....
- 4 soft, low sound .....
- 5 fellow .....

### COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

**2 READ** the extract again and arrange Bloom's actions and thoughts in the order in which they are presented. Then note down the relevant lines.

- ☐ Bloom realises there are twenty gravediggers.
- ☐ Bloom watches Ned Lambert's suit and thinks about a similar suit of his own.
- ☐ The coffin disappears into the black hole.
- ☐ Bloom remembers his father's death.
- ☐ Bloom stands behind the portly kindly caretaker.
- ☐ Bloom stands in front of the grave.
- ☐ Bloom muses on mortality and the very moment of death.
- ☐ Bloom hears a donkey braying in the distance.
- ☐ Bloom counts the people in front of him.



➤ **COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT**

**3 CONCENTRATE** on the narrative technique of this passage.

- 1 Has the time of narration any link with chronological time? Why?
- 2 Where does the action take place?
- 3 Some sentences describe the scene from the outside, others reproduce Bloom's thoughts. Underline them with two different colours; then note down the two levels of narration specifying the points of view adopted.
  - First level of narration: .....
  - Second level of narration: .....
- 4 Consider the sentence structure throughout the passage. Some sentences are regular with a conventional use of grammar; others lack subjects, verbs or are made up of only one word. Decide which level of narration they belong to.

**4 FOCUS** on Mr Bloom. He sees several bared heads in front of him; this turns out to be a stimulus which deviates the course of his thoughts. Complete the sequence below in order to get a clearer idea of his 'flow of thoughts'.

Bared heads → Thirteen → Unlucky number → .....

**5 DEFINE** the language and tone of the passage.

➤ **COMPETENCE: PRODUCING A WRITTEN TEXT ON A GIVEN SUBJECT**

**6 WRITE** a 10/12-line paragraph comparing this extract from Joyce's *Ulysses* to the Victorian novels you have studied as regards: setting in time and place, narrative technique and points of view, subject matter, characters and language.