

## JOYCE.COM

by Julie Sloan Brannon

Joyce's works occupy an odd place in our cultural history: his work is seen as an example of literary genius, and he is often referred to as the greatest writer in English of the twentieth century, yet much of the general public finds his works incomprehensible. Many allude to Joyce, but few actually read him. His image is used to market the idea of "literariness" and all the social status that word may imply, evidenced by his face emblazoned on the bags of the bookstore chain Barnes and Noble. This commodification of Joyce as emblem of intellectual snobbery stems from the cultural idea of Joyce's works as "Ph.D. literature," able to be understood only by the few, the proud, the academic. But, to be sure, Joyce first became known to the wider public as a writer of scandalous prose—first through the trial of the *Little Review's* editors, Jane Heap and Margaret Anderson, and later when the book was finally published in its entirety, in 1922, to loudly denunciatory reviews in the press. In fact, one famous photograph shows Joyce and Sylvia Beach seated in front of a placard proclaiming in large letters "The Scandal of *Ulysses*," the title of an article excoriating Joyce's novel that ran in *The Sporting Times* in 1922.<sup>1</sup>

Pornography played a strong role in marketing modernism; as Joyce Wexler states, "Explicit sex [in modernist works] was a protest against materialist social values, but it also increased sales . . . Censorship advertised the work of Joyce and Lawrence far beyond the avant-garde audience" (91). Wexler's thesis is that modernist writers, particularly Lawrence but also Joyce, were responding to "contradictory ideologies of authorship" in which money and serious art were antithetical. She places this antithesis squarely in the context of a conflict between Romanticism and Victorianism:

On the one hand, the Romantic artist as genius was expected to express an inviolable inner vision without regard for its rhetorical effect or market values. On the other hand, the Victorian author as professional was expected to earn a living by writing . . . In this conflict, art was aligned with writing for oneself, martyrdom, and self-expression, while sales were aligned with writing for an audience, professionalism, and rhetoric. The characteristic difficulty and obscenity of modernist fiction were formal responses to this situation. (91)

Wexler further states that "many modernists disavowed financial aims while benefiting materially from the erotic aspects of their work" (91), but it is highly arguable whether Joyce fits easily into this formulation. As early as *Dubliners*, Joyce was highly concerned with financial aims and with reaching a wide audience. Further, as Joseph Kelly has shown, Joyce's primary concern was to show Ireland its own face in his "nicely polished looking glass," surely an admission of rhetorical aims. And throughout his career, he was greatly interested in the reviews and sales of his work; in fact, he agreed to a publicity shoot for *Finnegans Wake* that appeared in *Time* magazine in 1938. Joyce's appearance on the cover

of *Time* was a calculated effort to boost sales for his last book, which had met with mixed reactions in serialization. In fact, a letter from Adrienne Monnier, partner of Sylvia Beach, specifically points to Joyce's concern with money; she mentions that André Gide found "something saintly" about Joyce's indifference to publishing success but that "[w]hat Gide doesn't know—and like the sons of Noah we put a veil over it—is that you are, on the contrary, very concerned about success and money" (Ellmann 651-52). Joyce was willing to trade on the reputation of *Ulysses* in order to help sales of *Finnegans Wake*, asking in the first session to be photographed with Sylvia Beach at Shakespeare and Company, even though the friendship between Beach and Joyce had been strained by this time over his decision to publish *Ulysses* in America.<sup>2</sup>

It was this decision that led to the censorship trial that defined *Ulysses* for the twentieth century. The legal strategy followed by defense attorney Morris Ernst in the 1931 trial relied heavily on positioning Joyce's work as a literary classic. Such a strategy discounted any evaluation of *Ulysses* as pornographic, based on a literary parallel to the concept of *noblese oblige* in which a classic could not be obscene by definition; it was art, and art was above lewdness. But the inclusion of Woolsey's decision as the foreword to the American edition of *Ulysses* further ensured that it would be forever linked to its early obscene reputation, by positioning the book's formerly banned status as the first thing that readers would encounter in the book. Woolsey states that *Ulysses* is "emetic" rather than "aphrodisiac" (Moscato and LeBlanc 38), but the end result of printing his decision in the American edition of 1934 is that readers continued to be reminded of the prospect of titillation.

Decades later, *Ulysses* is no longer viewed as being pornographic. But the book continues to be associated with pornography, albeit in a more repressed fashion. Of the portions of *Ulysses* that entered the public discourse as being obscene, the primary offending chapter was "Penelope." It is "Molly's soliloquy" that became the defining portion of *Ulysses* within popular culture, and the explanations of Joyce's works in articles appearing in popular newspapers and magazines continue to underscore this relationship. The current emphasis is on the chapter's stylistic innovations, suppressing the chapter's graphic sexuality, but the fact that this episode is more frequently cited than others in defining the importance of *Ulysses* to literature hearkens back to its early, obscene reputation. The other chapters of the book exhibit equally revolutionary narrative techniques, yet it is Molly's monologue that continues to serve as the representative for Joyce's impact upon modern fiction.

Joycean iconography exists on the border between academia and popular culture, functioning as what Lyotard calls a *differend*, a phrase which exists as a form disputed by mutually exclusive discursive practices, each discourse claiming ownership of the phrase while silencing the other. The academic Joyce is defined by a discourse which places Joyce's works inside the academy as the High Modern of High Moderns, a discourse which tends to suppress the pornographic elements of the texts in favor of valorizing those elements which reinforce their complexity—a discourse, in short, that forces a need for a critic/priest to unlock the holy mystery. The popular Joyce has a subliminal association with pornography, but this discourse has over time become overshadowed by an acceptance of the academic Joyce's definition of inaccessibility. However, there is ample evidence that the popular Joyce also asserts itself in terms antithetical to the academy.

To date, there are several studies of Joyce's use of the popular culture of his time, but few discussions of the uses to which current popular culture has put Joyce. Vincent Cheng

looks at numerous examples of Joyceana in popular culture and notes that the “‘conscious Joyce’—that is, what Joyce means, if anything at all, in mass culture . . . [is] mostly negative in connotation and attitude: obscure; obscene, esoteric; formidable; weird; degenerate; even insane” (180). Cheng proposes that an alternate Joycean Unconscious “exists and operates even within those who . . . have never heard of James Joyce and his works at the conscious level”; he appears to find this unconscious Joyce to be a more positive construct than the conscious Joyce (182). In an interesting example of what Cheng sees as a “moment of Joycean consciousness via a mass-culture experience,” he discusses a scene in “Back to School,” a film aimed at high school students and young adults. Sally Kellerman plays a college professor in this film, and in her introductory scene, she approaches the lectern of her class and begins reciting the last part of Molly Bloom’s soliloquy, ending with an impassioned and sensual “yes I will Yes.” Rodney Dangerfield, the film’s hero, is caught up in the emotion of the monologue and jumps up to cry, “Yes! Yes!” to the laughter of the other students. Kellerman replies: “Oh, thanks for the vote of confidence. I think Joyce is pretty hot, too. . . . And now that I’ve got your attention, I’d like to run down the reading list for the semester, see what else turns you on” (in Cheng 191). The message Cheng sees presented in this scene is that “Joyce is sexy and fun stuff. . . . Hollywood has immense power to get high school students interested in Joyce. . . . Now a teenager viewing *Back to School* and hearing of Joyce for the first time is likely to be more interested in reading such a radical dude” (192; italics in original).

While Cheng’s supposition here is correct, and such filmic references to Joyce can advertise his work to a larger audience outside of the university, the scene also operates within a cultural understanding of Joyce already present and depends on that understanding for characterization. Kellerman’s character in the film is a free spirit, sexually uninhibited and self-confident. Choosing to open a class on the first day of the term with a sexually charged reading is an indication of her role in the film, and for an audience unfamiliar with Joyce, it shows her unconventionality and sensuality; for an audience familiar with Joyce, it provides a nice way to parallel one unlikely couple with another (Kellerman/Dangerfield and Molly/Leopold). Further, for the first audience, an exposure to Joyce as “hot” continues the long association of Joyce with pornography. The popular Joyce literally disrupts the academic Joyce in this scene, by showing that *Ulysses* is not only “hot” but accessible, too—and further continues the shorthand of “Penelope”=*Ulysses* that exists in popular culture.

Cheng’s essay catalogues other appearances of Joyceana in mass culture, including popular songs, television shows, commercials, and t-shirts; he writes, “. . . if imitation and even parody are the sincerest forms of flattery, even if sometimes unacknowledged or perhaps unconscious, then [appearances of Joyce in popular culture] suggest that [he] is obviously getting a good deal of flattery and respect”; Cheng suggests that “a Joycean Unconscious is getting the culture to Say Yes [sic] to Joyce—and that, in this way, Joyce *is* getting some respect” (192). He ends on what can only be read as a note of hopefulness, and this subtext can be analyzed in part by understanding the perception of Joyce both inside and outside the academy. Cheng alludes to the uneasy relationship the non-academic world has with Joyce’s works, in that these novels *stand for* something elite and intellectual, which cannot be understood without some kind of specialized knowledge. Respect and suspicion (the latter often disguised as derision or parody) have long been strange bedfellows in

American thought about the academy, and they find themselves partners once again in the popular culture's estimation of Joyce's works. Yet, as Cheng demonstrates, Joyce does mean something in the real world. Students at the end of the twentieth century are immersed in mass culture at an unprecedented rate. They are therefore presumably exposed to what Cheng terms the "Joycean Unconscious" long before they get to university classrooms, whether or not their English professor reads Molly's breathless words on the first day of class.

But Joycean appearances in popular culture primarily underscore his value as an intellectual commodity, a value based on academic ownership of the works' meaning. The "snob" appeal of Joyce, based on this commodification, shapes the subtext of all appearances of Joyce or *Ulysses* in popular culture. It is the intellectual challenge of the book is reinforced through the web site "*Ulysses for Dummies*" (<http://www.bway.net/~hunger/ulysses.html>). The site yolks the book's reputation for difficulty together with an icon of anti-intellectualism, the highly successful ". . . for Dummies" series of reference books published by IDG Books Worldwide, Inc. This web site's satiric reinterpretation of Joyce's complex novel through cartoons and reductive chapter summaries exhibits the dualistic nature of the parody: it is both exaltation and effrontery. The home page of the web site reinforces Joyce's contradictory status of popular appeal and inaccessibility. Beneath the title of the page, a bold-faced statement proclaims, "As seen on the July 20, 1998 edition of ABC's *World News Tonight!*" This statement serves to reiterate Joyce's importance in the culture at large and points to an apparent public need for a "stripped-down, revved-up version" of *Ulysses*—and plays upon the ubiquitous "as seen on TV" blurb found on products of questionable quality sold in drugstores.

The text introducing "*Ulysses for Dummies*" highlights the book's status as "master-piece," but points out that

. . . the common reader has been reluctant to face Joyce's great panorama. Laden with obscure references and dogged by an ever-growing body of secondary literature, the book's reputation as a "difficult" work has placed a barrier between the book and its potential audience. This is a shame, because Joyce was writing for a general readership, and his novel offers a remarkable experience even for the reader with no prior familiarity with Joyce's world. ("*Ulysses for Dummies*" 10/21/98)

The paragraph pits the Joyce Industry against the common reader, and claims Joyce for the non-academic audience by pointing out Joyce's intent to write for that audience; the academics "dog" the book with secondary literature, and it is this imposition by academia rather than Joyce's own obscure references or nontraditional writing style that places barriers between *Ulysses* and readers. As a part of academia, *Ulysses* exemplifies the qualities valued by that institution: complexity, linguistic virtuosity, self-conscious artistry, and irony (among others). These are the qualities that contribute to *Ulysses*' reputation for difficulty, as they are associated with the very elements of modern literariness that distanced it from being pornographic in the censorship trial; in effect, it was these qualities, associated with academically canonized twentieth century literature, that began to strengthen barriers between *Ulysses* and the non-specialist reader.

The web site's commodification of Joyce's work as symbol of Literature is emphasized in the next introductory paragraph:

*From Hunger* [the domain carrying the page] smells an opportunity when we step in it. Herewith, our stripped-down, revved-up version of Joyce's great work, which we, with one eye on the marketplace, have called *Ulysses for Dummies* [sic].

By mentioning the "marketplace," the authors are reinscribing the popular appeal of *Ulysses* (as well as blatantly coöpting the successful "For Dummies" series) while simultaneously trading on its opposite status as inaccessible: they have, ironically, positioned themselves as being indispensable to readers, just as the critic claims to be, and become part of that "ever-growing body of secondary literature." As such, the site offers these summaries of the high points of *Ulysses* in the form of a sales pitch:

Now you can thrill to the discussion of Shakespeare in chapter 9; weep with Simon Dedalus at Dignam's funeral in chapter 6; frolic with Bloom and Stephen in chapter 15's dreamscape of Nighttown; and join in Molly's optimistic vindication of the world in chapter 18. (10/21/98)

The site's characterization of the "Circe" chapter as a "frolic" for Bloom and Stephen is not only reductive but also implies that the Nighttown episode is a happy romp rather than the phantasmagorical weaving of all the major themes of betrayal, loss, and reconciliation in the book that it is. Further, the sexually graphic nature of both "Circe" and "Penelope" is completely elided in this description, indicating that the book's status as "difficult" has completely overridden the book's earlier reputation for pornography. Of course, for the audience familiar with *Ulysses*, the description is humorous and ironic, but for a reader new to the text, the description may function to shape the way she will view the book.

The illustrations for each chapter represent some of the graphic elements of the book—for example, Bloom and Stephen are shown, backs to the screen, urinating in the garden in "Ithaca"—but the child-like simplicity of the illustrations preclude any but a humorous response. The stylized representations of the three major characters reduce them to metonymic symbols: Bloom with his mustache and bowler hat; Stephen carrying a baton-shaped stick, representing his ashplant; and Molly, completely absent from the illustrations and captions until her soliloquy chapter, where she is shown in bed. While the drawings of Stephen and Molly are generic representations of male and female figures, Bloom's representation evokes Charlie Chaplin's "Little Tramp," and this identification reinforces the comic aspects of the novel conjured by the introductory page's flippant style.

Each chapter's illustration is captioned with a one-sentence summary of the action taking place and the time of day. For example, the opening "Telemachus" page shows a picture of Stephen and a robed Buck Mulligan on the balcony of the Martello Tower, overlooking a child-like drawing of the sea, complete with triangular sailboat, shining yellow sun, and flying birds represented by a curled "V." The caption reads: "June 16, 1904. 8:00 a.m. Stephen Dedalus, a young schoolteacher, speaks to his friend, 'stately, plump' Buck Mulligan, in the disused Dublin watchtower where they live." All of the captions for each

episode are similarly structured. There is no mention of the Homeric parallels in any of the captions, with the sole exception of “Aeolus.” The site’s authors stated that they had no ulterior motive for excluding the Homeric titles, nor did they have any particular reason for including “Aeolus” (Hunka and Tzanis, correspondence with author 11/5/98). Whether or not it was a deliberate move, the sole reference to “Aeolus” serves to point to the Homeric parallels’ importance to the novel, and repeats the kind of interpretive stance taken in much of the secondary literature. The Homeric schema was printed in Gilbert’s 1936 book on *Ulysses*, although Joyce had for years attempted to suppress it from critics. Eliot, too, pointed out the importance of the Homeric structure in his 1922 essay, “*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth” which helped shape so much critical attention to *Ulysses*. The reference reinforces the Homeric parallels and therefore the critical emphasis placed upon them—and further erodes the web site’s introductory claim to side step the critical intervention “dogging” *Ulysses* that has kept barriers between the common reader and *Ulysses* in place.

Lost in the web site’s summary of the novel’s plot is Molly’s adultery, a curious erasure of one of the major elements of the story, and a further repression of the novel’s link to sexuality. The emphasis for each chapter is the relationship between Bloom and Stephen; Molly is not even mentioned until her appearance in the final chapter. The tragic nature of Bloom’s wanderings—in essence, Bloom intentionally stays away as long as possible in tacit acceptance of his wife’s adultery—is completely lost in this rendering.

The web site, therefore, while claiming to make *Ulysses* palatable “for Dummies,” in reality further confuses Joyce’s text for the uninitiated. In fact, the site is humorous only to those who have read *Ulysses* already and can fill the gaps left in the text by the summaries. The illustrations posit someone knowledgeable about the details of *Ulysses*; the real audience, then, of “*Ulysses* for Dummies” is not the general reader afraid to tackle Joyce’s text because of its reputation for difficulty, but rather those readers who have already achieved some level of comprehension of *Ulysses*, perhaps by wading through the very material the site’s introductory page scorns as “dogging” Joyce’s novel. Once again, the book’s difficulty is highlighted in spite of the site’s simplification of the plot of *Ulysses*.

The final illustration at the site shows Molly and Bloom in bed, with the sun rising outside the window. Molly is sitting up in bed, with Bloom lying down next to her, his head at her feet. The word “YES” appears and disappears over her head, without a dialogue bubble, merely a line connecting Molly to the word, presumably to indicate that the word is not spoken aloud. The caption reads, “Sunrise. Bloom goes to bed, waking his wife Molly, who thinks about how much she loves her husband.” The effect of this caption, combined with the illustration, completely erases the pornographic elements of Molly’s soliloquy and emphasizes the comical (in the classical sense of the word) element of the novel—the happy couple is united. The web site therefore functions to repress the pornographic reputation of *Ulysses* in favor of the intellectualized one, clear indication that the dominant trope associated with *Ulysses* is the one denoting the novel’s difficulty.<sup>3</sup>

The public Joyce remains embedded within a trope of difficulty, tied to the obscenity trial and his reputation for pornography, however subliminally, and separated from the academic Joyce through ridicule and satire. Popular discourse around *Ulysses* valorizes the book’s affinity with more accessible elements of fiction that do not call for specialized training in close reading to understand, such as content rather than literary style. The book is marketed to the general reader under the rubric of more plot- or character-driven

concerns like comedy, tragedy, psychological realism, and thematic treatment of human sexuality. The discourse of the popular *Ulysses* is complicated, however, by its dependence on the academic *Ulysses* for continued validation as a literary masterpiece. In effect, the public *Ulysses* works both within and against what Janice Radway describes as the academic culture's "affirm[ation of] the validity and preeminence of [a] single set of criteria against which all works are measured, and [the insistence] that there is only one appropriate way to read" (260).

The question remains, in light of the complicated iconography surrounding Joyce and his arguably most famous work, just exactly who reads *Ulysses* and why? This is an area only recently addressed by scholars, and one in which much work still needs to be done. What is it about a book with a such reputation for difficulty that it continues to sell nearly 100,000 copies a year? Joyce.com is big business and the boundaries between literary and middlebrow culture are destabilized when it comes to *Ulysses*—a fact which might have greatly amused the old artificer himself.

## NOTES

1. The fact that such a review appeared in a paper devoted primarily to sporting events parallels the Joyce Wars' appearance in popular periodicals seventy years later; both speak to cultural concerns over Joyce, albeit the earlier appearance indicated a concern with Joyce's pornography and the later with Joyce's literary legacy. From the beginning, it is clear, Joyce's writing heralded something important for Anglo-American culture, although the historically determined nature of that importance diverged wildly.
2. See Ellmann, 651-53; Beach, 201-06.
3. An unintended parody of the censorship and copyright issues plaguing editions of *Ulysses* occurs at the web site, as well. The authors include a disclaimer to the effect that the site is a parody, and invite readers to "[f]ollow the threatened litigation that engendered this disclaimer" by providing a hypertext link to letters sent by the legal firm representing the publishers of the "For Dummies" series, IDG Books Worldwide, Inc. The link leads to a page entitled, "Our Brush with Intellectual Property Litigation," which discloses that the authors received a notice of intent to sue for trademark infringement because they used the words "for Dummies." They also publish an earnestly sarcastic reply to this notice that includes threatened counter-litigation, in the form of a class action suit against IDG Books for defamation of character since the publishers "make such a significant buck by characterizing its readers as morons."

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