

HOUSEHOLD TRASH: DOMESTICITY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN  
*THE LAMPLIGHTER* AND THE “NAUSICAA” EPISODE OF *ULYSSES*

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**A**lthough the role of consumer culture in *Ulysses* has received significant recent critical attention, what is frequently overlooked is how often Joyce presents society’s “massproducts” both in the process of consumption and as the remainder that that consumption leaves in its wake as waste, rubbish, and trash. The violent trajectory of the missile the Citizen hurls at Bloom in “Cyclops” involves an *empty* tin of Jacobs’ biscuits, thus revealing the material trace of a commercial product that remains once its content has been digested. Returning home in “Ithaca,” Bloom discovers pieces of more static, if nonetheless threatening trash, when he encounters flakes of Plumtree’s Potted Meat, evidently the residue of Molly and Blazes Boylan’s post-coital snack. While these pieces of trash in the text bear personal significance for *Ulysses*’ characters, they also introduce implicit discourses of national identity. The Union Jack emblem that commonly adorned tins of Jacobs biscuits (Opie 39) adds further irony to the Citizen’s jingoistic hypocrisy, while the Plumtree’s advertising slogan, “*What is home without Plumtree’s Potted Meat? Incomplete. With it an abode of bliss?*” (U 61),<sup>1</sup> introduces an idealized notion of “home” that carried an especially strong appeal for Irish consumers in the years prior to home rule (Osteen 121).

Alongside this physical rubbish, *Ulysses* also depicts an array of literary “trash” through its attention to the popular texts of mass culture; like the novel’s physical rubbish, this textual waste also bears the trace of Ireland’s colonial relationship to England. Enconced in his home away from home, the backyard outhouse, Bloom enjoys the popular journal *Titbits*, for both its literary content and its materiality. More important, however, this London-based journal embodies Bloom’s fantasy of authorship and the economic freedom he imagines it would bring; this fantasy of independence is all the more significant considering Bloom’s position as a low-level advertising canvasser in the relatively parochial economy of 1904 Dublin.<sup>2</sup>

A minor player in the equally stifling economy of the Dublin marriage market, “Nausicaa’s” Gerty MacDowell relies on popular literature for her fantasy of the ideal lover who will rescue her from the isolation imposed by her physical defect. Gerty’s most sustained immersion in popular literature—and one of the more sustained commentaries on mass-market fiction in *Ulysses* as a whole—comes from her reading of Maria Cummins’s sentimental novel *The Lamplighter* (1854). Critics have long acknowledged Joyce’s Gerty MacDowell as the namesake of Cummins’s Gertrude Flint,<sup>3</sup> just as they generally understand the first half of “Nausicaa” as a parody of the excesses of Cummins’s fiction. A paragraph early in *The Lamplighter* summarizing Gertrude’s transition from the abusive

house of Nan Grant to the relative calm of the Graham household offers a representative example of these excesses.

Left at three years of age dependent upon the mercy and charity of a world in which she was friendless and alone, Gertrude had, during her period of residence at Nan Grant's, found little of that mercy, and still less of that charity. But, though her turbulent spirit rebelled at the treatment she received, she was too young to reason upon the subject, or come to any philosophical conclusions about the general hardness and cruelty of humanity; and, had she done so, such impressions could not but have been effaced amidst the atmosphere of love and kindness which surrounded her during the succeeding period, when, cherished and protected in the home of her kind foster-father, she enjoyed a degree of parental tenderness which rarely falls to the lot of an orphan. (*TL* 141)

In this passage, Cummins's prose is akin to what Joyce would identify as his own method in "Nausicaa," which he described in a letter to Frank Budgen as a "a namby pamby jammy marmalady drawersy (alto la!) style..." (*SL* 246). With its sentimental tone, lexical redundancy, and tortuous syntax (the above excerpt is only two sentences long), *The Lamplighter* would seem an easy target for mid nineteenth-century reviewers. Yet their response to Cummins's style proved generally positive, and the negative evaluations it did receive were often as concerned with Cummins's prodigious sales as with her literary merit. In an 1885 letter to his publisher, William D. Ticknor, Nathaniel Hawthorne leveled his now famous charge against Cummins and the culture of literary consumption he saw embodied in her popularity.

America is now given over to a d——d mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash—and I should be ashamed of myself if I did succeed. What is the mystery of these innumerable editions of the *Lamplighter*, and other books neither better nor worse?—worse they could not be, and better they need not be, when they sell by the 100.000. (304)

Here literary merit becomes irrelevant to the demands of the marketplace, with its indiscriminate appetite for "trash."

Recent Joyce criticism on the role of *The Lamplighter* in the "Nausicaa" episode of *Ulysses* accepts Hawthorne's designation largely at face value. Current debate focuses primarily on whether Joyce's Gerty MacDowell stands as a model of indoctrination in or resistance to the model of feminine virtue and domestic management embodied in Gertrude Flint, the heroine of Cummins's novel. Suzette Henke, noting Gerty's "embarrassing proximity" (132) to the sentimentality of *The Lamplighter*, suggests that if Gerty is the determined product of mass market fiction, Bloom is no less such a product of mass culture, nor are we. Kimberly Devlin takes an opposite tack in observing Gerty's unsuitability as a romance heroine, claiming that in "Nausicaa" Joyce "comically subverts both the possibility and the desirability" (383) of feminine virtue proposed in Cummins's novel, and her analysis

usefully points out significant moments in which Gerty MacDowell resists the ideology implicit in *The Lamplighter*. The issue of Gerty's agency is a crucial one for understanding "Nausicaa," to be sure. But by focusing attention almost exclusively on the degree of agency Gerty possesses in relationship to the interpellative appeals of mass culture, this critical debate overlooks the more fundamental question of the ideological ground of this interpellation, regardless of whether it succeeds in Gerty's case. Critics of domesticity in American literature have explored sentimental fiction as a site of a host of "extra-domestic" issues, including race, class and political affiliation. Borrowing from their methodology, I argue here that one of the most significant functions of *The Lamplighter's* role in "Nausicaa" is to draw our attention to the manner in which discourses of domesticity, and related notions of established ideals of womanhood, are both constituted by and constitutive of larger social discourses—in particular, discourses of national identity.

This approach raises one of the most pressing questions of *The Lamplighter's* relationship to "Nausicaa": why did Joyce choose such an insistently American novel as intertext for an episode that equally insists upon Gerty's Irishness?<sup>4</sup> Cummins's novel is so full of oddly self-conscious phrases such as "the American populace" (TL 259), the "Yankee nation" (TL 269), and "the industrious citizen of our working land" (TL 286) that she often seems to be describing the U.S. to a foreign audience. Similarly, "Nausicaa's" emphasis on Gerty's national identity appears almost gratuitous at times. Our immediate answer to the question, "But who was Gerty?" is that she was "in very truth, as fair a specimen of winsome Irish girlhood as one could wish to see." By the end of the third page of the episode, we learn that Gerty's eyes "were of the bluest Irish blue" and that "God's fair land of Ireland did not hold her equal" (U 285-6). Perhaps most tellingly, when "Nausicaa" turns its attention to the Irishness of two of its male characters, the Caffrey twins, the episode links domesticity to male belligerence; as the twins squabble over a sandcastle, the narrative observes that "every little Irishman's house is his castle" (U 285).

Obligingly, both "Nausicaa" and *The Lamplighter* present us with appropriate household despots. In Cummins's novel, Mr. Graham, Gertrude's adoptive father, though seeming a "liberal and highly respectable man," soon succumbs to "the influence of his narrow and prejudiced sentiments" and reveals himself "ready to act the tyrant" (TL 142). Angered by Gertrude's request to leave the comfortable home he has provided for her to care for her friends, Mrs. Sullivan and Mrs. Sullivan's ailing father, Graham at first berates then ignores Gertrude, drowning her words with his "violent ringing of the table-bell" (TL 146). By contrast, Gerty MacDowell must contend with a more familial tyrant, who suffers from influences of spirit rather than sentiment, and whose violence is thus more extreme. Listening to the hymns of the men's temperance retreat, Gerty confesses that "she had even witnessed in the home circle deeds of violence caused by intemperance and had seen her own father, a prey to the fumes of intoxication, forget himself completely for if there was one thing of all things that Gerty knew it was the man who lifts his hand to a woman save in the way of kindness deserves to be branded as the lowest of the low" (U 289). Following the logic of sentimental fiction, for both Gertrude and Gerty the solution to such household ills is to assume the role of angel in the house, to become the self-sacrificing heroine whose submission to duty will mend the rifts in the domestic fabric.

In her discussion of *The Lamplighter* in *Women's Fiction*, Nina Baym suggests that Cummins's novel is more subversive than the ideology of pious feminine submissiveness

it seems to endorse,<sup>5</sup> since Gerty's religious submission requires the exercise of self-will and her submission to duty—becoming the angel in the house of the ill and ill-tempered—she accepts by choice (166). While I find Baym's reading generally convincing, it is important to note that the cultural work the novel accomplished among the reading public was often something quite different than Baym's nuanced interpretation. Frequently critics saw both the reading and writing of sentimental fiction as a corrective to women's political agitation. A Southern newspaper praised the reading of Cummins's fiction as an appropriate female pastime, contrasting Cummins's influence with that of her shrill contemporaries, who were “making themselves ridiculous by their efforts to induce legislation to accord them positions and relations in the state, incompatible with the discharge of those duties, for the performance of which they were made what they are—women and not men” (qtd in Williams 190)<sup>6</sup>. Similarly, Joyce's Gerty thinks of herself as a “womanly woman” (U 293) committed to the ideal of feminine sacrifice. In this respect, Gerty allies herself with relatively conservative Irish women's organizations, which saw their role as supporting the political activities of Ireland's men, rather than with the more radical suffrage movement emerging at that time, a movement which would lead to the founding of the Irish Women's Franchise League in 1908. Borrowing the rhetoric of the suffragettes' critics, Gerty asserts that she is “not like those other girls flighty unfeminine” (U 293); here Gerty's parataxis suggests that she has swallowed this rhetoric whole, reproducing it without syntactical linkage, just as she has swallowed whole the notion of the angel in the house.

But to be the angel in the house, one must first have a house. In *The Lamplighter*, Gertrude Flint travels from one home to another, learning submission and self-possession through no less than five changes of residence, beginning with the malevolent Nan Grant, who boils Gertrude's kitten alive and whom Gertrude promptly strikes with a stick, and ending, once her temper has finally been subdued, with the promise of domestic bliss with her childhood beau, Willie Sullivan. Joyce's Gerty, already a “ministering angel” (U 291) in her own mind, fantasizes a similarly happy ending for herself in which she exchanges the insecurities of an alcoholic household for life with her “dreamhusband” (U 293) ensconced “in a nice snug and cosy little homely house” (U 289).

Like the circuitousness of the route that Gertrude Flint must travel to find her proper home, the intensity of Gerty's fantasy suggests the difficulties inherent in her desire for domestic tranquility. While Gerty will at least obliquely allude to her lame foot as “that one shortcoming” (U 298), the specter of her dispossession remains the blind spot in her narrative. Though she thinks of herself in terms of her “winsome Irish girlhood” (U 286), we learn later that Gerty is nearly twenty-two, her prospects for marriage in the competitive Dublin matrimonial market dwindling with each passing year. An old maid in a dysfunctional household, Gerty's future looks dim indeed. In contrast to Gerty's ellipsis, however, Cummins's *Lamplighter* is fraught with references to dispossession. In her attempts to maintain a stable domestic space within the home of her benefactors the Grahams, the “orphaned” Gertrude Flint—described herself as a “stranger” (TL 154)—is frequently faced with the prospect of “strangers” (TL 247) in her adoptive house, and at one point her stepsisters go so far as to dispossess her of her bedroom. Even so commonplace an event as a summer excursion becomes the occasion for the rhetoric of national identity; encountering a full hotel in the resort town of Saratoga, the Grahams berate the hotel clerk for his suggestion that they might be “colonized out” (TL 281), that is, placed in lodging in

a separate building. This notion of dispossession locates itself fully within the context of national identity when we consider that for Gertrude's home life to achieve completion, both Gertrude's long lost biological father, Philip Amory, and her childhood sweetheart, Willie Sullivan, must return from their expatriate voyages—both significantly suffering from homesickness—to take their rightful places in Gertrude's domestic realm.

This rhetoric of dispossession takes on a different valence in an Irish context, where “strangers in the house” serves as allegory for the British colonial presence in Ireland. Indeed, had Gerty's sometime boyfriend Reggie Wylie not dumped her, she would have been admitting strangers into her house, since “there were Protestants in his family” (U287). While Gerty figures her religious tolerance in light of the illimitable possibilities of ideal love—regarding the mysterious stranger Leopold Bloom on the beach, she thinks, “Even if he was a protestant or methodist she could convert him easily if he truly loved her” (U 293)—the need for such accommodation highlights the way in which religion and the corresponding suggestion of divisive political affiliation infiltrate what is ostensibly the private, domestic sphere of Gerty's romantic longing. Given Gerty's belief in the infinite potential of “true love” to overcome social division, however, we might suppose that Bloom's Jewishness would prove no more an insurmountable barrier than the Protestants in Wylie's family.

Here Gerty's dream of converting the man she loves runs counter to the ideal of feminine submission she generally espouses throughout *Nausicaa* and which is endorsed by Cummins's novel. Following *The Lamplighter's* Gertrude, whose first major achievement in life is cleaning the apartment of her rescuer, Truman Flint, Gerty proposes to secure a home through her artful domestic management skills. Unlike Gertrude, however, Gerty's imagined homemaking requires an additional degree of submission, since she must submit both to fictionalized notions of female conduct and to the dictates of consumer culture. Borrowing the language of advertising, Gerty equates homemaking with a traffic in what she calls “creature comforts” (U 289). For Gerty this means preparing recipes from women's magazine and shopping. “Her griddlecakes done to a goldenbrown hue and queen Anne's pudding of delightful creaminess had won golden opinions from all,” Gerty boasts (U289). Gerty's thoughts shift to furnishing her imagined home, which in turn leads her to engage in an interior monologue of product placement as she wishes for “a beautifully appointed drawingroom with picture and engravings” and “chintz covers for the chairs and that silver toastrack in Clery's summer jumble sales like they have in rich houses” (U 289). In this respect, Gerty is perhaps closer to her father than she would care to admit. A similar kind of domestic product placement characterizes Gerty's description of her father's business, which she assists when he is busy recovering from drinking binges; he sells “Catesby's cork lino[leum], artistic, standard designs, fit for a palace, gives tiptop wear and always bright and cheery in the home” (U 291).

While Thomas Richards argues that Gerty MacDowell's immersion in consumer culture simply replicates the ideological determinism of *The Lamplighter* in a more alienated form, rendering her “one-dimensional” and allowing her to be “summarily pigeonholed” (211), I would like to suggest that Gerty's relationship to consumer culture's media images grants her the opportunity to subvert the submissive ideology of Cummins's novel. By moving between different ideological positions, each unsatisfactory in some way, Gerty resists being subsumed by any one discourse. Borrowing *The Lamplighter's* pious tone, Gerty

professes abhorrence at commodified images of female sexuality; “the pictures cut out of papers of those skirt dancers and highkickers” (U 299) that her friend Bertha Supple has found in the room of her male lodger simultaneously elicit Gerty’s censure and her fascination. Looking across the strand at the figure of Leopold Bloom, Gerty asserts the superiority of her imagined connection with the mysterious stranger over the boarder’s consumption of the skirt dancer photos. Gerty quickly reveals the tautology of her argument, however, insisting that desire serves as its own justification: “But this was altogether different from a thing like that because there was all the difference because she could almost feel him draw her face to his and the first quick hot touch of his handsome lips.” Within a few lines Gerty has adopted the image of the skirt dancer as the site from which she can articulate herself as a desiring subject: “she wasn’t ashamed and he wasn’t either to look in that immodest way like that because he couldn’t resist the sight of that wondrous revelation half offered like those skirt dancers behaving so immodest” (U 300).

That she must at the same time assume the position of the object of male desire problematizes this assumed identity, but it is worth noting the host of ideologies dictating feminine conduct that Gerty subverts: the Roman Catholic Church, whose dogma Gerty conveniently negotiates by misreading the difference between venial and mortal sin, the instruction of sentimental fiction like *The Lamplighter*, which Gerty employs for its style, while largely discarding its content, and traditional notions of Irish womanhood, which emphasized chastity before marriage and home life before all else. The political dimension of Gerty’s subversion is underscored by the fireworks bursting into “dewy stars” (U 300) overhead as Gerty exposes herself. More than simply hyperbolic setting to Gerty’s excesses of fantasy, the fireworks also suggest the military dimension of Britain’s dominion over Ireland; this particular display originates in the Mirus Bazaar, which earlier in the day was the site of a visit by William Humble Ward, the lord lieutenant of Ireland.<sup>7</sup> Figuring herself as desiring subject, Gerty negotiates the litter of both twentieth-century media images and the submissive ideology of nineteenth-century sentimental fiction. By charting this process of negotiation, “Nausicaa” uncovers the social fiction which grounds national identity upon established ideals of womanhood; it is for this reason—not merely for its role as object of satire—that Joyce found an American authored sentimental novel such as *The Lamplighter* so productive an intertext. In its careful attention to the political dimension of this “trash” fiction, *Ulysses* demonstrates that “domestic affairs” can no more easily be separated into neat divisions of public and private than can “home” and “home rule.”

## NOTES

1. I will use the following abbreviations in this essay: *U*: James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler et al. (New York: Random House, 1986); *SL*: James Joyce, *Selected Letters of James Joyce*, ed. Richard Ellmann (New York: Viking, 1975); *TL*: Maria Susanna Cummins, *The Lamplighter*, ed. Nina Baym (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988).
2. For a fuller discussion of Bloom’s position within this liminal economy, see Jennifer Wicke’s *Advertising Fictions: Literature, Advertisement, and Social Reading* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 125-9.
3. To minimize confusion between Cummins’s heroine and her latter-day counterpart, for the purposes of my discussion I will refer to Cummins’s character as Gertrude and Joyce’s as Gerty.
4. In addition to the connection between domestic fiction and national identity, a series of references to Irishness in Cummins’s novel may have also caught Joyce’s attention. Set in the historical destination of a large number

of Irish immigrants, *The Lamplighter* portrays a Boston in which the terms “Irish” and “servant” are interchangeable. The Graham’s maid, in fact, is always referred to as “Irish Katy,” and her function as minor character in the novel is that of a member of a rustic chorus. Bidding Gertrude farewell as Cummins’s dutiful heroine leaves the Graham home to care for her friend Mrs. Sullivan’s ailing father, Katy offers “Miss Gairthruide” what passes for a phoneticized Irish blessing: “I’m shure yer’ll never be betther off than what I wish her” (*TL* 149). Less saccharine if equally patronizing is the commentary on Irishness offered by Mrs. Sullivan herself. Telling Emily Graham of Mrs. Sullivan’s reticence to hire a nurse to care for her ailing father, Gertrude recounts that Mrs. Sullivan “declares she would sooner admit a wild beast into her house than an Irish girl” (*TL* 131). Interestingly enough, this epithet is repeated in the novel, its only subsequent appearance, in a passage describing Philip Amory’s—later revealed as Gertrude’s biological father—boyhood flight from the Graham home.

5. More recent scholarship on sentimental fiction continues this trend of identifying a subversive component to Gertrude’s ostensible submission. In her essay “*The Lamplighter, The Wide, Wide World, and Hope Leslie: The Recipes for Nineteenth-Century American Women’s Novels*,” *Legacy* 8.1 (1991):17-28, Erica Bauermeister examines *The Lamplighter* within the larger context of mid-nineteenth century sentimental novels, establishing a convincing claim that Cummins’s novel negotiates a middle course between its two most direct literary models, Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1851) and Catherine Sedgwick’s *Hope Leslie* (1827). According to Bauermeister, *The Lamplighter* begins by subscribing to the philosophy of feminine self-sacrifice and submission extolled by the former novel, but moves closer to the far more radical argument for the necessity of women’s autonomy found in the latter text. Seen in its proper context, the latter half of Cummins’s novel is not a failed attempt to master the formula of domestic fiction laid out by Warner as earlier critics thought, but rather in its movement “from self conquest to self-assertion” (23) represents an adept negotiation of the complex textual field of mid-nineteenth-century women’s popular fiction.
6. This passage comes from a review of *The Lamplighter* from an unidentified newspaper clipping collected in the Cummins Papers. In a footnote in her essay “‘Promoting an Extensive Sale’: The Production and Reception of *The Lamplighter*,” *The New England Quarterly* 69 (1996): 179-200, Susan Williams suggests that the review probably appeared in the *New Orleans Picayune* (190 fn. 37).
7. See Don Gifford’s *Ulysses Annotated*, 8.1162n and 13.686n.

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