

# Humour and the Journey to Hell

MADY GILLESPIE

---

Scholars know the humor in *Ulysses* can be erudite, visceral, or just stupid. But can it be polemical, and in what way? Mady Gillespie deals with this issue with admirable finesse, looking for answers in an odd location—the funeral in “Hades”—and distinguishing between the content of a joke and the social positioning from which it is launched. In looking at Leopold Bloom and his puzzling attempt to tell an anti-Semitic joke, she puts her attention on jokes that fail, and that fail because jokes depend on shared social values, being part of a community. As she argues, “pre-existing social powers” do much to determine the success of a joke. Jokes launched from the outside are much more tenuous in their delivery—but much more evocative because of that.

—Dr. Leonard Diepeveen

---

**K**nowing nothing about the novel *Ulysses*, one might find the episode entitled “Hades” an odd place to begin a search for humour. As the hero, Leopold Bloom, takes his journey to the Underworld in the form of a funeral procession, one cannot help but think that a funeral is not the time or place for jokes. However, in this chapter, *Ulysses* effectively uses humour juxtaposed with the seriousness of the occasion, to critique the social order in Dublin in 1904.

There are two big jokes in the Hades episode: the failed anti-Semitic joke told by Leopold Bloom in the carriage, and the successful joke told later on by John O’Connell in the cemetery. There are also a few subtler jokes mixed in, and some things, which are not so much true jokes as moments of internal humour. Marian Eide points out in her article “Bad Timing and *Ulysses*’s Failed Jokes,” that

## Humour and the Journey to Hell

jokes are made funny when the timing is good and the community (or audience) is receptive to the joke (426). Good timing is tied into anticipation, a look to the future which Eide claims is difficult to find in *Ulysses*, a novel consciously and deeply tied to nostalgia and looking to the past (this may be why it has so many failed jokes that suffer from bad timing) (427). However, crucial to Bloom's failure in this episode is the aspect of community - or lack thereof.

As a Jewish man in a crowd of Irish-Catholics (and one Protestant), Bloom is always inevitably missing the community aspect of a good joke. He is an outsider to these men, who will never fully accept or understand him, and so they can never truly appreciate his humour. The result is that his joke places an emphasis on his otherness. He tries to poke fun at the miserly Jew of his story, but then accidentally lumps himself into the same category when he shortly thereafter displays his ignorance of Catholic customs of mourning (Eide 434).

He further sabotages himself when he begins his joke by announcing how funny it is several times (Bell 409, note 6.227); he ruins any sense of anticipation, which Eide contends is important to a successful joke (425). Expectations are raised too high, considering that Bloom, while a man of complex inner thought, lacks the verbal expression necessary to tell the joke well (Bell 407, note 6.264). He fails in his joke, and it is Cunningham who salvages the punch line and clarifies the characters (Bell 409, note 6.277). However, as Eide points out, Cunningham usurping the joke only works to make it even less funny to

the reader. When he and the other men laugh at Dodd's frugality, they are prejudiced men further justifying their own prejudice to themselves (434). Bloom attempts to use the joke to assert "social power" over his audience by provoking their laughter, but using jokes in this way is meant to reassert a common social order of which Bloom is not part (Eide 433). Bloom cannot use anti-Semitic humour to ingratiate himself to the group because he does not have the insider status necessary to evoke laughter instead of scorn.

This joke directly contrasts the one told by John O'Connell a few pages later, when the group is making its way to Dignam's burial plot. Bloom describes O'Connell as someone whom everyone likes, and whose favour is valued (Joyce 103). He is, in many ways, the anti-Bloom. Bloom seems to think he has eight children (Joyce 104), and imagines for O'Connell a relationship with his wife that is full of sex (Joyce 104). John O'Connell is also linked in Bloom's mind to Daniel O'Connell (Joyce 104), an Irish revolutionary, ascribing to the caretaker a strong and well-respected Irish family history (Gifford 35, note 2.269). Bloom with his outsider status, sexless marriage, dead son, and shameful family history seems pitiable in comparison.

Therefore, when O'Connell makes a joke on the way to the burial plot of Paddy Dignam, the other men show appreciation for his efforts to lighten the mood. His joke is "rewarded by smiles" (Joyce 103), which is a result of his place within the community and his superior story-telling skills. Where Bloom falters, confuses, and gets interrupted, O'Connell adds some small bit of theatre to his joke,

## Humour and the Journey to Hell

blinking as his character did (Bell 454, note 6.728), and triumphantly delivering the punch line to his rapt audience. Differences in ability aside, Bloom could never deliver a joke as well within this group of men because he will never have as good a place as O'Connell in their community. Bloom and the other men lack shared values that would give their jokes the context needed to be mutually understandable, instead of tellingly ignorant. When Bloom attempts his anti-Semitic joke, he is playing at both the social and religious values he does not share, whereas O'Connell is playing into a mutual understanding of Catholic practices.

His failed joke aside, Leopold Bloom is not an un-funny man. His internal thoughts are often cause for laughter or humour, and this frequently stems from some little joke or thought he has had that he does not share externally. His internal jokes are often inappropriate for the occasion, but it is also worth considering whether there is any occasion where the men accompanying Bloom would consider his jokes appropriate or amusing. After all, when O'Connell tells his joke about two drunks in a cemetery, it is not necessarily appropriate for the occasion either. This is hinted at in Cunningham's need to explain to Hynes that O'Connell means no harm (Joyce 103). Cunningham feels he has to justify this graveside joke to other members of the party, and perhaps himself, because he knows that it is an inappropriate time for humour. However, O'Connell is a member of their community, and one with a valued social position, and so Cunningham is willing to forgive the joke and read good intentions into O'Connell's actions. He is

not willing to do this for Bloom, instead reading any and all of his inappropriate comments as proof that he is outside the community.

Bloom's internal humour relates to death and the dead, which is thematic but inappropriate to share with devout Catholics who have a more reverential approach to death than Bloom. At one point Bloom thinks about how human corpses would make good fertilizer. His mind is drawn to one man in particular of his acquaintance who he thinks would make top-grade fertilizer because of his robustness and diet (Joyce 104). This thought is linked closely to ideas about blood libel, a very anti-Semitic and persistent myth about Jewish people using Christians as human sacrifices in their religious traditions (Bell 460, 6.771-2). Internally Bloom is aware of how ridiculous blood libel is and he mocks it by ridiculously considering which of his acquaintances would be best used for fertilizer. Just as the shared humour of the other men is used to denigrate Jews, Bloom's internal humour is used to point at the ridiculous aspects of that shared humour – and it is both more successful and funnier for the reader.

Additionally, more than once in this episode the idea arises that the dead might not mind a joke anyways, and Bloom even postulates that the dead men, should they be able to hear it, would like for people to tell the odd joke in the cemetery (Joyce 105). In that case, it would seem that jokes are inappropriate at funerals only because the living find them so, and the living only claim to find them inappropriate because it would mean disrespecting the dead. If, as Bloom thinks, the dead would appreciate the

## Humour and the Journey to Hell

joke, then it cannot cause them disrespect, and therefore cannot be inappropriate. Bloom even jokes internally about Heaven, picturing it as a place to which one can arrive late and find it already closed - the implication being that it is like a pub (Joyce 105). Then he misquotes a phrase, and ends up saying that there must be a period of reverence before the living can mock the dead (Bell 462, note 6.794), which does not fit with Catholic ideals. Bloom, in his humour, is able to criticize the Catholic ways of mourning, both for being more about the living than the dead, and for being more idealistic than realistic. In a novel where he faces fairly constant anti-Semitism, one cannot fault Bloom for being critical, or for finding the humour in Catholic practice.

The theme of humour in death is further referenced when Bloom considers Mrs. Dignam, and how she must feel upon her husband's death. Bloom passingly thinks, "has the laugh at him now," (Joyce 98) and while this statement's subject is ambiguous, some scholars point to the widow Dignam (437, note 6.543). Bloom seems to be aware that Mrs. Dignam may be more relieved than saddened to be free of her husband and his drinking problem (Bell 437, note 6.543). It has ruined their family financially and leads to his premature death, and so Bloom considers that she may find humour, of a sort, in Dignam's passing. Humour in this case is used, not as a way to create community, but once again as a way for an outsider to critique those who make up their own community. Mrs. Dignam is not as obvious an outsider as Bloom, but in the Dublin of 1904, there were nevertheless distinct, gendered,

## Mady Gillespie

spheres of social interaction and community. Mrs. Dignam was not part of her husband's community and her prospective humour as imagined by Bloom can be read as her critique of that group.

Leopold Bloom would probably be the first to argue that death does not preclude humour. "Hades" as an episode uses humour - failed and successful, internal and external, racist and well meaning - to demonstrate and criticize communities and social power dynamics in Leopold Bloom's group of acquaintances, and in Dublin as a whole. As Eide says, if shared humour can be used to establish or reinforce community, then failed humour can be used to demonstrate where friendship and community disintegrate (426). Bloom is not an outsider because he told a bad joke, just as O'Connell is not an insider because he told a good one; rather, their ability to be successful in this episode was already pre-determined by how much they were considered part of the community, and thus how willing others were to laugh with them.

## Humour and the Journey to Hell

### WORKS CITED

- Bell, R. H. "'Preparatory to anything else': Introduction to Joyce's Hades." *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2001, pp. 363-499.s
- Eide, Marian. "Bad Timing and *Ulysses's* Failed Jokes." *NOVEL*, vol. 46, no. 3, 2013, pp. 424-37.
- Gifford, Don, and Robert J. Seidman. *Ulysses annotated: notes for James Joyce's Ulysses*. Univ of California Press, 2008.
- Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. 1922. Edited by Jeri Johnson, Oxford University Press, 1993.