

# The Cyclical Nature of People in “Ithica”

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Up to the point of its penultimate chapter, *Ulysses* builds itself on individuality, much of which is established through stream of consciousness. Yet, while *Ulysses* is famous for its depictions of stream of consciousness, it has a parallel move which steps away from the human and toward text. Justin Moir’s essay looks at the apex of that move in the “Ithaca” episode, which is entirely constructed in terms of impersonal questions and answers. The flattening which results, Moir argues, helps create a move away from individuality. So far, so good. But, Moir argues – and this is where the essay moves in a surprising and insightful direction – this transition is not just because the episode moves outside of stream of consciousness; rather, the narrative’s peculiarities posit a lack of uniqueness, in which people are interchangeable, all their actions having parallels with others. As Moir argues, “we are to such a great degree similar that the experience of one would not differ significantly if repeated by another.”

– Dr. Leonard Diepeveen

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**A**s with other chapters in *Ulysses* not using the established stream of consciousness style of the novel, the shift allows the reader to examine the characters in a different, more objective light. Removed, at least explicitly, from the inner workings of Leopold and Stephen, one can assess more impartially the actions and thoughts of the characters; free from the justifications the characters provide for their own deeds, one may form their own judgment over their motivations. However, this chapter in particular allows the reader to see outside of not only the central figures of the novel, but outside of all human action. In doing so, Joyce paints a picture of the

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interconnectedness of human endeavour; what happens now has happened before and, will happen again. This essay will argue that the "Ithaca" chapter in James Joyce's *Ulysses* depicts all human action as inevitably cyclical and similar. Using the interrogative narrator, repeated invocations of history, the paralleling of man and nature, and the suggestion of a lack of original thought, Joyce presents a function of humanity characterized by its homogeneity and repetition.

The narrative figure in "Ithaca" is one that is radically impartial. Devoid of any degree of favoritism or preference, the inquisitor and responder deliver information meticulously and without inference, depicting each fact, occurrence, and person mentioned as equal in value to simple truth. This act flattens the importance of the individual; as Lawrence puts it, Joyce "meticulously strings together facts without establishing any sense of priority among them [...] characters are treated as physical objects moving in space [...] the equation of people and objects is evidence of a general tonal and emotional leveling which surpasses anything in the early chapters." (Lawrence 560). Nullifying individual value points to an interchangeability of humanity, the implication being that we are (so) or (similar to such a degree), that the experience of one would not differ significantly if repeated by another. This notion is presented clearly in the narrator's assessment of the similarity of the educations of Stephen and Leopold (referred to in this passage as Bloom): "Substituting Stephen for Bloom Bloom would have passed successively through a dame's school and

high school. Substituting Bloom for Stephen Blephen would have passed [...] through the matriculation, first arts second arts and arts degree courses of the royal university." (Joyce 635). This passage implies that, regardless of who undertook it, the educational paths of both Bloom and Stephen would have been successfully completed; the individual doing the work is irrelevant. In addition, the fusion of the names of Stephen and Bloom highlight how interchangeable people are, divided only by names which are themselves made mutable in the passage. The external narrative style of the chapter reduces the individuality of characters and experiences to commonality and inevitability, pointing to the idea that all human endeavour is endlessly similar and cyclical.

The generalizing of individual action and experience is magnified in the chapter by connecting the present to historical events. By forming constant and pervasive links between the present actions of Bloom and Stephen and the goings on of the past, both distant and recent, the chapter creates a spiraling path of events, each rooted in a past that invalidates the possibility of their uniqueness in the present. The presentation of Bloom's entire day, related to religious events and ceremonies, is perhaps the clearest indication of this sentiment. Every motion and action undertaken by Leopold whether present or future finds a parallel in the biblical past; from the connection of his making breakfast to a burnt offering, to the Beaver street brawl's link to Armageddon (Joyce 680-681). The efficient categorization of every action in both past and prophecy undercuts any semblance of uniqueness

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in them. The path Bloom walks is both historical and one foretold to occur, existing simply as a presentation of a repetitive phenomenon. What results is the suggestion that the world is governed by its past, that the present is simply a recreation of events that have already occurred. This forces the reader to assess the events for their persistent significance rather than momentary function; as Flynn suggests, "meaning is not inherent to objects, rather it must be created anew through them. History is this creative action upon things." (Flynn 77). This attempt to interpret history is ever-present in "Ithaca"; even Bloom engages in it through his theory of "the progressive extension of the field of individual development" (Joyce 621), derived from a seemingly irrelevant string of dates (Joyce 620). History is the governor of the events in "Ithaca", shown to be the foundation of action as well as demanding interpretation, further indicating the repetitive similarity of humanity in the section.

The connection of individuals to historical allusion in "Ithaca" is reinforced by a second paralleling of human activity with the eternal cycles of nature. The motions of the natural world are constant and consistent, defined by predictable repetition and certainty; to connect willful action to this is to almost contradict the notion of will, systematizing human action. This technique can be seen in Bloom's lengthy appreciation of water itself. "It's universality : its democratic equality and constancy to its nature in seeking its own level [...] the restlessness of its waves and surface particles visiting in turn all parts of its seaboard: the independence of its units." (Joyce 624). The

traits Bloom first appreciates are near personifications of water, appreciating the substance for its embodiment of human ideals and implicitly painting these aspects as natural as they are human. The restlessness of the water Bloom describes, parallels his day spent restlessly shifting across the scope of his city as water flows through its passages. The human elements Joyce places in water engages humanity in natural cycles, confining them to natural repetition. This connection of the natural and the human is taken up by the characters, notably with the implications of Bloom's connection of the moon and women. "Her antiquity in preceding and surviving successive tellurian generations [...] her constancy under all her phases, rising and setting by her appointed times" (Joyce 654). By connecting women to the eternity and constancy of the moon he unwittingly involves all of humanity; the regularity he describes is that of all people, the unchanging recurrence a facet of human life. Humans are repeatedly connected with the movements of the natural world, human resilience and ideals interwoven with the certainty of the tides and celestial revolutions. The actions of people paralleled with the cycles of nature indicate the repetitive foundation of human action, further highlighting the commonality of man in "Ithaca".

The recurrence of events effectively conveys the cyclical nature of both history and nature, a recursive humanity in action. However, even this is not the extent of the repetitive nature of humanity; even something as radically independent as thought is shown to be derived from contextual precedent.

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The express individuality of thought is undercut by evidence of the unoriginality of ideas; the theories of Bloom and Stephen, though often confusing and bizarre, can be retraced to past occurrences, both in their own lives and in the lives of others. This idea is communicated effectively in the presentation of Bloom's book collection (Joyce 660-662). These books each represent aspects of Bloom's life. The military novels connect him to Molly's military father and Sandow's book represents his focus on the physical. An important detail is the presentation of these in reflection; Bloom is drawn to the mirror upon seeing the image of himself, "a solitary (ipsoprelative) mutable (aliorelative) man" (Joyce 660), but ends observing the collection of books. This double reflection suggests the equivalence of the two; Bloom is as much himself as a product of the books, another recurrence of humanity. In addition, the very frame of the chapter further indicates the lack of original thought. Though questioning is occurring, the questioner, as a narrative force, implicitly already knows the answers to come, reshaping the interrogation as a closed circle of information. As Brown eloquently puts this, "the questions and answers are related, not to each other, but to a totalizing third force, received ideas which are, as of the time of the questioning, known in advance [...] both the questioner and the respondent must know what has occurred before the Q&A takes place." (Brown 67-68). The ideas in "Ithaca" are not newly generated, but are further examples of the cyclical nature of human life, not creative expressions but

reproductions of past human work, showing the recurrent nature of man in this chapter.

As a close to the narrative of Bloom and Stephen, this chapter acts as a powerful counterpoint to the incredible individuality of previous chapters. Dealing with thought processes as they happen leaves little chance for reflection on the origins of these thoughts beyond the moment of their occurrence. In contrast, "Ithaca" examines every detail of every action, thoroughly addressing the reason behind every occurrence, allowing a view of the interconnectedness of Stephen, Bloom, and, by extension, human nature. "Ithaca" presents a view of human activity as interconnected and cyclical. In *Ulysses*, a book marked by an exploration of what constitutes the individual, delving into what binds and connects even the most disparate parts (of what) adds a new degree of insight into the diverse makeup of (x).

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