Pornography, Pleasure, and Policing Female Sexuality in Joyce’s *Ulysses*

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“I’m all clean come and dirty me.” This sentence, said by Gerty MacDowell in the “Nausicaa” episode of *Ulysses*, is one of the most problematic sentences of James Joyce’s magnum opus. From a feminist perspective, the interplay between sex and virginity in *Ulysses* is integral in understanding Joyce, and Gerty’s projected innocent female sexuality epitomizes Joyce’s feminist critique of the social mores of his time. Gerty is not in fact a passive virgin beseeching Leopold Bloom to “come and dirty” her. Not only is Gerty’s consciousness tainted with the projection of Leopold Bloom’s sexual fantasy and the social purist rhetoric that dominated the discourse of turn-of-the-century Ireland, but it is also representative of the complicated, lived experience of women in 1904 Dublin. Joyce portrays this nuanced experience through several women characters in *Ulysses*, but in this essay we will focus primarily on Gerty MacDowell and Molly Bloom. Gerty and Molly each represent in their own way the “real” woman behind the mutoscope picture, the sexual being behind the virgin façade, the impoverished but monogamous girl behind the prostitute.

The exposure of these women’s experiences by Joyce can lead one to varying conclusions, ranging from chauvinistic Joyce to radical feminist Joyce, a side which I tend to incline towards. The question is, is Joyce a feminist? I will seek to answer that question by examining Joyce’s treatment of female sexuality in *Ulysses*, primarily in the “Nausicaa” and “Penelope” episodes. An important theme in *Ulysses* is the ordinariness
of life, and Gerty and Molly are perfect examples of Joyce’s endless crusade to replace vain hypocrisy with honest reality. Whatever seems bona fide in the world of James Joyce and *Ulysses* so often turns out to be artificial. Religion and sex, marriage and prostitution, virtue and sin, prayer and pornography, male and female, and other seemingly opposite notions tend to converge subconsciously throughout “Nausicaa” and “Penelope” and indeed throughout *Ulysses* as a whole. Joyce persistently throws into question many common conventions and prejudices in such a way that our eyes are forced open to the diversity of human experience. In this essay I will examine Gerty MacDowell, Molly Bloom, and the “Three P’s”: pornography, pleasure, and policing female sexuality. In discussing both Gerty and Molly, I will attempt to paint a picture of life in 1904 Dublin and examine the society in and about which Joyce was writing, because to understand his treatment of women and female sexuality, one simply must grasp the complexities of *Ulysses*’ social context.

Before delving into the “Three P’s,” however, I want to briefly describe a couple terms that will show up several times in this essay. The first is “feminism,” and the second is “social purity.” Feminism is a fluid concept that often reflects the social concerns of its time. It has over time meant asserting the right of women to work, to vote, to have power over their husbands, to participate in politics, and a myriad of other things. For the purposes of this essay, however, I would like to use a simple definition, that feminism is merely the assertion that men and women are equal. This equality can be applied to areas of life, but a straightforward way of looking at it is that men and women both have the right to participate fully in both the private and public sphere. This includes economics, politics, sex, family, education, and so forth. The tension between the private
and public spheres—the first of which has traditionally been reserved for women, and the second of which has traditionally been reserved for men—is a tension that plays out in a lot of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature. Joyce is no exception, so it is from that viewpoint that we will treat feminism in *Ulysses*. Also, the concept of “social purity” will appear throughout this essay. It is a complicated notion but basically refers to the social purity movement during Joyce’s time consisting of a myriad of organizations—in Ireland, the most visible was the National Vigilance Association. Social purity was, as Katherine Mullin notes in *James Joyce, Sexuality, and Social Purity*, a well-organized and politically active “formidable branch of the elaborate network of moral reform which flourished at the close of the nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth centuries” (4). Social purity rhetoric and activism was a constant enemy for Joyce, usually in the form of literary censorship, and the concept is very important to understanding Joyce’s treatment of women in this novel.

The thirteenth episode of *Ulysses*, “Nausicaa,” includes the first female interior monologue of the novel (450 pages in), and probing the integrity of this “interior monologue” is an important task. The basic plotline of the chapter is as follows: Leopold Bloom wanders along Sandymount Strand, sits on the rocks and admires the young and beautiful Gerty MacDowell from afar. As the scene evolves, Bloom and Gerty share a contact-free sexual encounter as they each masturbate in front of one another. If “Nausicaa” is unpacked, we can find a lot of problematic relevance to the Dublin society of 1904 about which Joyce was writing. This brings us to the first “P”: Pornography. The masturbation in this scene results from Bloom first gaining voyeuristic pleasure from observing Gerty and then beginning to pleasure himself, and subsequently Gerty is
aroused by her ability to excite Bloom so she follows suit. But the root voyeurism that begins the sexual encounter must be questioned. What is the role of pornography in Bloom and Gerty’s world?

The common conception of pornography is an image or description of sexual fantasy, usually of a woman. In the American Heritage Dictionary, pornography is defined as, “sexually explicit pictures, writing, or other material whose primary purpose is to cause sexual arousal.” Interestingly, though, the origin of the word (which is Greek) comes from porne, meaning “prostitute,” and graphos, meaning “to write,” so the word literally means “to write about prostitutes.” Under that definition Joyce is a bit of a pornographer himself…but a larger problem addressed in “Nausicaa” is the blurred line between pornographic/sexual fantasy and religious fantasy. The former is experienced overtly by Leopold Bloom as he masturbates in front of the image of Gerty MacDowell, and the latter is experienced by a group of men “worshipping” the Virgin Mary at mass. A large part of this blurred line is because of Joyce’s recurring comparisons of Gerty to the Virgin Mary, and it is difficult to distinguish between religious and sexual supplication. This hazy comparison should not be lost on Joyce’s readers: Mariology, or the growing Irish reverence for the Virgin Mary, was pervasive in the Irish culture of Joyce’s time. In Joyce and Feminism Bonnie Kime Scott writes that in the late nineteenth century, “The mature Mary, Mother of Sorrows, became “the most appropriate model for a generation of women…many widowed in post-famine Ireland” (15).

The main comparisons of Gerty to Mary lie in description—Gerty wears the trademark blue of the Virgin Mary. “Gerty’s [eyes] were of the bluest Irish blue” *(Ulysses* 453), and “Gerty was dressed simply…[in] a neat blouse of electric blue” (455).
More than the color she wears, Gerty is described as wanting to comfort Bloom just as Mary comforts all those who flee to her protection. Bloom, after masturbating, feels guilty but is ultimately comforted by Gerty: “There was an infinite store of mercy in those eyes, for him too a word of pardon even though he had erred and sinned and wandered” (478). Similarly, the erring men’s voices “sang in supplication to the Virgin most powerful, Virgin most merciful” (461). The image of Gerty clearly (and pornographically) causes sexual arousal for Bloom, and her linkage to Mary leads us to wonder if there is a denied arousal among the male supplicants in the church. Can religious images be pornographic? Perhaps. In fact, an earlier scene in *Ulysses* should also be addressed, in which Bloom witnesses a priest administering the Eucharist. Bloom describes the sexually-charged scene:

Women knelt…The priest went along by them, murmuring, holding the thing in his hands. He stopped at each…and put it neatly into her mouth. Her hat and head sank…The priest bent down to put it into her mouth…Shut your eyes and open your mouth. What? *Corpus*. Body. Corpse. Good idea the Latin. Stupefies them first…They don’t seem to chew it; only swallow it down (99).

Joyce outrageously equates distributing the Eucharist with oral sex, and we are left astounded, questioning the very essence of religious ritual—including the Virgin Mary-worshipping happening nearby in the church. The uncanny blending of the religious and the sexual here speaks to a society-wide problem of denying female sexuality and worshipping female virginity. As we shall see, through both the characters of Gerty and Molly, Joyce seeks to debunk the myth of passive female virginity.

Katherine Mullin, in “Making a spectacle of herself: Gerty MacDowell through the mutoscope,” argues that Gerty is a representation of Joyce’s tirade against the
Victorian and Edwardian ideologies of social purity that worked against most of his creations. Joyce uses Gerty to ridicule society and subvert its virginity-worshipping culture through a parody of two things: the mutoscope and the sentimental novel. Both instruments dominate the rhetoric, rhythm and description in “Nausicaa.” Mullin describes the mutoscope as “a fin de siècle optical toy which destabilized the ideas of youth femininity and violated innocence upon which social purity rhetoric depended” (141). On the heels of the Industrial Revolution and in the new technology of turn-of-the-century Great Britain, new developments such as the mutoscope were common, but the particular hypocrisy of the mutoscope in a culture that policed female sexuality is very poignant in Joyce’s novel. Judging by Mullin’s description, it is easy to see why Joyce chose to use the mutoscope—it fits in perfectly with his trademark social subversion.

What exactly was the mutoscope? It was a turn-of-the-century invention that consisted of a series of photographs mounted on a cylinder, and in order to use a mutoscope a viewer would put money in a slot, peer through a peephole, and turn a hand-crank to set the pictures in motion (Mullin 145).

While the mutoscope did not originate as a pornographic tool, it quickly became one. As Mullin has noted, the placement of the hand-crank near the groin, the location of some mutoscopes in male bathrooms or all-male mutoscope parlors, the ability to stop and start the pictures to focus in on a favorite, and the largely female-dominated photographs all contributed to the pornographic development of the mutoscope. Bloom summons the mutoscope daydream in “Nausicaa,” shortly after masturbating: “A dream of well-filled hose. Where was that? Ah, yes. Mutoscope pictures in Capel street: for men only. Peeping Tom. Willy’s hat and what the girls did with it” (480). The last two phrases
here are both titles of contemporary mutoscope films, both of which rely on social conventions of female purity and “accidental” male intrusion into the domestic sphere—usually meaning that a man will walk into a scene of women bathing, or a woman’s skirt will “accidentally” blow up in the air as she does her grocery shopping. Therefore they allow the creators and marketers of such films to apparently uphold female virtue but also to provide erotic entertainment for voyeuristic men.

The second rhetorical instrument in “Nausicaa” brings our attention to the second “P”: Pleasure. The romantic, sappy “interior monologue” of Gerty, who pines away for a dream husband to come and take care of her, dominates the chapter. The sentimental novel is referenced by Gerty, actually, when she remembers reading *The Lamplighter*, by Maria Cummins, a bestselling novel whose heroine was also named Gerty (473). Couched in the language of the sentimental novel, Gerty is a young, vulnerable virgin who needs protection. However, as the chapter unfolds we see that she is much more highly sexualized than an innocent virgin, and she possesses a certain degree of agency in Bloom’s masturbatory actions: Gerty takes pleasure in the fact that she has sexual power over Bloom and this pleasure leads her to her own sexual climax:

> And she saw a long Roman candle going…up, up, and, in the tense hush, they were all breathless with excitement as it went higher and higher and she had to lean back more and more…and her face was suffused with a divine, an entrancing blush from straining back and he could see her other things too…and she let him and she saw that he saw and then it went so high it went out of sight a moment and she was trembling in every limb…he had a full view…and 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 the wondrous revealment half offered like those skirtdancers behaving so immodest before gentlemen looking and he kept on looking, looking…and O! then the Roman candle burst and it was like a sigh of O!
everyone cried O! O! in raptures and it gushed out of it a stream… (477).

Gerty has obvious agency and pleasure in this sexual encounter, which illustrates Joyce’s radical treatment of female sexuality. Female orgasm was a strong taboo, as sex was meant strictly for procreation within marriage and not for pleasure. That Gerty would have a masturbatory orgasm outside of marriage while a man did the same right in front of her could have been called prostitution, the ultimate slander. We shall see in the following paragraphs why female sexual pleasure and agency was, virtually, prohibited.

We now come to the third “P”: Policing female sexuality. The sentimental novel—and the censorship of “dirty” novels such as Joyce’s—was a tool of social purists in Joyce’s time for policing female sexuality and encouraging the notion that young females are innocent virgins that need to be protected. As female autonomy in society grew, and female prostitution became more overt, a moral panic developed which led to the controlling of female bodies. This was particularly pronounced in Ireland because of a few factors, one being the Great Famine.

Before the Famine, Catholicism in Ireland was very loose, especially in terms of doctrine on sexuality, and the mass-going rate was extremely low—Irish Catholicism was essentially a masked, pre-Christian Celtic paganism, the remnants of a Gaelic Ireland which in fact rather revered open female sexuality, as we shall see later on in our discussion of Molly Bloom. After the Famine, however, the Catholic Church took the reins of power in Ireland and the Devotional Revolution set in within a generation. The Devotional Revolution, coined by the American historian Emmet Larkin, describes the great transformation of Irish Catholicism, post-Famine. Professor Kevin Whelan writes in his “Introduction to Ireland” course handout, “The Great Famine,” “An entirely
revamped religious practice hardened into a powerful and rigid cultural formation.” What is sometimes described as traditional Catholicism was actually new, emerging out of the Famine trauma—this new Catholicism was strict, pious, powerful, and very sexually rigid. “The devastation wreaked by the Famine strengthened the Church’s hand in imposing its modernizing moral crusade,” Whelan writes.

Identifying the effects of the Famine is useful alongside placement of female virtue within the social context of turn-of-the-century Dublin. Barely a generation or two removed from the Famine, its effects were still acutely felt in Joyce’s time but rarely acknowledged. It has been described by some as the Great Silence, referring to its traumatic and, indeed, silencing effects on the Irish people. But the Devotional Revolution cannot be ignored when dealing with post-Famine Irish culture: Pre-famine mass-going levels were less than ten percent; by 1900 mass-going levels among Irish Catholics was at nearly one hundred percent. This new religious crusade spread throughout Irish society and created a new model for a virtuous Irish woman. Bonnie Kime Scott writes, in *Joyce and Feminism*:

> After centuries of English plantations and the disaster of the famine…the ideal of the Irish peasant woman became the Irish colleen, a young beauty with submissive, downcast eyes, a humble shawl, and a pale, starved cheek (14).

While it is valuable to recognize the effects of the Famine and the newly rigid form of Catholicism in Ireland, it must also be stressed that the moral crusade of Joyce’s time was not reserved only for Ireland. In fact, it was largely the product of Victorian Puritanism—the social purity movement, as discussed at the beginning of this essay. The fact that social purity was of English origin helps us analyze why Joyce would choose to
fight it so strongly. It was representative of colonial residue and continual control of the British over the Irish. Katherine Mullin writes in *James Joyce, Sexuality, and Social Purity*, “The Englishness of social purity in an Ireland Joyce so shrewdly designated ‘semicolonial’ (*Finnegans Wake* 152:16) is a crucial aspect of his subversion” (21).

The Devotional Revolution and the moral policing of the social purity movement were large factors in the development of social principles restricting female sexuality and the ongoing acceptance of those in power policing female bodies. Gerty MacDowell knows that even if she wants to use her sexuality to lure Bloom in, she must do so with a virgin façade or risk being labeled a whore. For example, after knowingly seducing Bloom and allowing him to masturbate in front of her, “She glanced at him as she bent forward quickly, a pathetic little glance of piteous protest, of shy reproach” (478). Perhaps by including this Joyce is mocking the social convention of parading virtue for all to see. Indeed, *Ulysses* was not only on the heels of the Devotional Revolution but also of the Victorian Age. Scott continues, “The rising Irish bourgeois middle class followed Victorian English dictates of femininity. Young women should be virginal and ignorant of sexuality…always grooming themselves to be marketable brides” (14). Maria Cummins’ heroine in the hugely popular Victorian Era novel *The Lamplighter* is the epitome of female virtue, and because she holds out and waits for her dream husband, he comes. For her, Mullin points out, “the economically fortunate marriage and the physical modesty are intimately associated” (142), but lame Gerty MacDowell represents the bitter reality that virtue doesn’t necessary lead to economic stability. In fact, using sex appeal to court male attention and, ultimately, marriage, is a faster and more successful track to
fiscal comfort. But, using sex appeal to court male attention was a sign of sexual
degeneracy and lack of ambition. Could that possibly be a fair judgment?

A similar situation arose in America in the early twentieth century, actually,
where the social purity movement was also hard at work. After Reconstruction following
the American Civil War, lots of black women (former slaves) migrated north to urban
areas and were met with strong discrimination. There was a very active prostitution
market in most large American cities at the time, and many black women were persuaded
to come north and “work”—thinking they were getting accommodations and respectable
work—but they would often end up in brothels. “Clean” work of the time mainly meant
secretarial and office work, but those positions were reserved strictly for white women.
So, not wanting to work in brothels, many black women turned instead to the
entertainment industry because that was really the only available work besides being a
domestic servant for a white woman (hardly a step above slavery). Because of the
occurrences of black women in brothels and the notorious entertainment industry, a
society-wide prejudice evolved which automatically assumed that black women needed
institutional protection of their sexuality because they had no control over themselves and
would automatically give in to vice. In “Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban
Context,” Hazel Carby describes the “moral panics” that evolved out of black female
migration: “One serious consequence was that the behavior of black female migrants was
characterized as sexually degenerate and, therefore, socially dangerous.” The resulting
social discourse created a relationship “between the moral unacceptable economics of sex
for sale and a morally acceptable policing of black female sexuality” (739).
This morally and socially acceptable standard of female sexuality was not restricted to black American women. Women like Gerty MacDowell and Molly Bloom were subject to similar constraints. Underneath the moral panic in America were “fears of a rampant and uncontrolled female sexuality…and fears of the assertion of an independent black female desire” (746). Fear of assertive female sexuality in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Ireland was certainly prevalent. A socially acceptable moral order had been put in place (and upheld by the Church) and it would control expression of female sexuality at all costs—even if that meant ignoring the hypocrisy of voyeuristic and immoral things such as the mutoscope and the brothel. Just as black female expressions of sexuality were seen as a threat to black masculinity in the American middle class, white female expressions of sexuality were also threats to white masculinity because much male power lies in the ability to protect women and “virginity.”

Because of the threat of female sexuality, a movement arose in the mid-nineteenth century that would become intrinsic to the values of Victorian-Era England and Ireland. This movement was epitomized by the now-canonized poem by Coventry Patmore, “The Angel in the House.” In the poem, he describes the ideal woman and wife as “simply, subtly, sweet,” “Maid and Wife,” and “meek.” The poem represents an insidious ideology designed to keep women in a subordinate role in the house. As briefly touched on in my comments about feminism at the beginning of this essay, one of the greatest tensions of Joyce’s time was the contention between private and public sphere. The “Angel in the House” ideology was explicitly meant to keep women in the private sphere. The “meek”
virgin ideal was the prescribed role for women in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century.

Ideologies of social purity and female virginity also spread into the early feminist movement of the late nineteenth century. Early feminist thinking was effective in empowering women to a certain extent but contained several problematic aspects, largely because of the culture of social purity. Linda Gordon and Ellen Dubois assert in “Seeking Ecstasy on the Battlefield: Danger and Pleasure in Nineteenth-Century Feminist Sexual Thought” that feminist thinking in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century placed great importance on asserting the right of women to abstain from sex, reject prostitution, and be protected from rape, but placed little to no emphasis on the possibilities of female sexuality and sexual desire. This type of feminist discourse remained within the structures of male dominance and belittled female agency, the authors argue. These feminists’ saw prostitution as the ultimate sexual danger, their definition of prostitution encompassed all forms of casual sex, paid or not, and any women engaging in “prostitution” was a helpless victim (9). The “repressive tendencies of this campaign [against prostitution] overwhelmed its liberatory aspects and threw a pall over feminism’s whole approach to sexuality,” Gordon and Dubois write (14). As feminism evolved, some activists began placing emphasis on women’s sexual desire, but on the whole, Gordon and Dubois suggest, “nineteenth-century feminists were only relatively ‘pro-sex,’ and most of them shared with social purity advocates a belief in the need to control, contain, and harness physiological sex expression to ‘higher’ ends” (17).
Much feminist thinking, and indeed, thinking about sexuality in general, in Ireland during Joyce’s time was directly influenced by thinkers in England, via the social purity movement. In *James Joyce and Sexuality*, Richard Brown writes:

One of the forms of sexual differentiation common in England in the nineteenth century was the view, now frequently attributed to William Acton, that women ‘are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind’. Joyce’s fiction clearly gives the lie to that (115).

Brown goes on to say that to contemporary feminists there was an apparent “distaste for sexuality” among prominent feminists who campaigned against prostitution, such as Josephine Butler and the Pankhursts. So, in a sense, one could argue that Joyce was not a true feminist, if you define feminism by his contemporaries. But, the fact that *Ulysses* both liberates and exposes hypocritical and controlling notions of female sexuality gives credence to the claim that Joyce is even more of a feminist than his contemporaries, particularly Frances Sheehy-Skeffington and the Sheehy sisters, a Dublin family with whom Joyce was quite close.

Early twentieth-century practices of policing female sexuality and repressing female sexual pleasure are interwoven throughout *Ulysses* and can be plainly seen in the consciousnesses of Gerty MacDowell and Molly Bloom. Because female sexuality was so repressed, asserting masculinity and male sexuality directly relied on the perpetuation of coy, dependent masquerades of virginity expressed by females. Leopold Bloom, our much-lauded hero in *Ulysses*, is subject to these constraints—he projects his sexual fantasies onto Gerty MacDowell, which blurs our vision of what she is really like. There are a few things which point to Bloom’s exaggerated extrapolation of Gerty’s desires and looks. First of all, Bloom is an ad-man. He fantasizes about imagery quite often, and a lot
of the sentimental language about Gerty is interlaced with influence from women’s
magazines. The way the language is used is as if Gerty embraces advice from women’s
magazines and pop culture not to feel better about herself but to increase her sex appeal. She
dresses “with the instinctive taste of a votary of Dame Fashion for she felt that there
was just a might that he might be out,” and wears electric blue “because it was expected
in the *Lady’s Pictorial*” (457). The ensuing in-depth description of Gerty’s clothing and
style has Bloom—known for his attention to detail—written all over it.

Secondly, Gerty is described in a way that likens her to a Greek statue, a woman
of perfect dimensions, beauty, and grace. Earlier in the novel, Buck Mulligan sees Bloom
admiring the rear end of a Greek statue in the National Gallery (257). Clearly, Bloom has
an affinity for Greek ideals of beauty:

> The waxen pallor of her face was almost spiritual in its
> ivorylike purity though her rosebud mouth was a genuine
> Cupid’s bow, Greekly perfect. Her hands were of finely
> veined alabaster with tapering fingers…There was an
> innate refinement, a languid queenly *hauteur* about Gerty
> which was unmistakably evidenced in her delicate hands
> and higharched instep (452-3).

Through this description, we see that Bloom is projecting his idea of beauty onto
the female object before him, Gerty, in order to sexually excite himself. Thus Gerty
becomes an image with the purpose of sexual arousal, also known as *pornography*. From
this perspective, Gerty’s “consciousness” becomes tainted with Bloom’s projections of
what she may or may not be thinking, and it is probably not a stretch to say that Gerty’s
appearance and romantic thoughts—“with all the heart of her she longs to be his only”—
about Bloom are embellished by Bloom to increase his sexual excitement (457). She most
likely does not look like a “Greekly perfect” statue; after all, she is Irish.
Another important clue that lets us know our image of Gerty is filtered through Bloom’s sexual fantasies is that when Bloom notices that she has a lame foot her monologue ends abruptly. “She’s lame! O!” says Bloom’s interior monologue (479). He is instantly turned off: “Jilted beauty. A defect is ten times worse in a woman.” Clearly, if he had known about Gerty’s lameness he wouldn’t have been comparing her to a beautiful Greek statue. But, just because our vision of Gerty is skewed from Bloom’s perspective, that isn’t to say that Gerty doesn’t enjoy her end of the sexual encounter, as conferred previously in regards to her own sexual climax. Bloom is aroused when he thinks she enjoys his attention and she is in turn aroused by her own power to excite him. I think that it is fiscal desire, rather than sexual desire, however, that motivates Gerty to become an agent in Bloom’s masturbation. Gerty possesses no economic power but she does possess sexual power, which she exercises over Bloom. The economic reality that engendered particular expressions of female sexuality in Joyce’s time cannot be overlooked.

In Jane Austen’s novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, Charlotte Lucas marries a man she does not love or even admire, Mr. Collins. While such an undertaking seems absurd, a closer look reveals that Charlotte is, indeed under the same restraints as Miss Gerty MacDowell. Austen writes:

> Without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want. This preservative she had now obtained; and at the age of twenty-seven, without having ever been handsome, she felt all the good luck of it” (Volume 1, Chapter 22).
Knowing that marriage is the only prospect for a woman to survive and maintain “preservative from want” in life must have been awfully depressing for women like Charlotte and Gerty. But the reality remains, and it is perhaps even more depressing that women who chose to move outside those restrictive boundaries were often degraded and marginalized. Gerty MacDowell pathetically tries to mask her seduction of Bloom, as mentioned earlier, because of her imminent need to marry. “The years were slipping by for her, one by one,” Joyce writes (474). Many women suffered the conventional constraints of sexual expression and financial security and so channeled much of their energy into finding a husband as soon as possible, regardless of particular affection.

Molly Bloom, too, harbored under conventional sexual and financial restraints that, in a sense, imprisoned women in Joyce’s time. She too picked a husband partly out of necessity: At one point in the novel, she says of Bloom: “As well him as another” (933). But, Molly presents a visionary new model for women of her time to express their autonomy and sexuality. If Gerty offers a pathetic attempt to mask her sexuality, Molly Bloom certainly does not. If Gerty’s consciousness, as the first female consciousness of the novel, is filtered through the narration of Leopold Bloom, then Molly gives us the first liberated female consciousness. (Or, as liberated as it can be in a novel of male authorship.) But just as the question, “who was Gerty?” (457) is posed in the “Nausicaa” episode, we must also ask, who is Molly Bloom?

Just as Leopold Bloom’s character importantly corresponds to that of Odysseus in Homer’s Odyssey, Molly Bloom’s character corresponds to that of Penelope, Odysseus’ wife. While Odysseus is off traveling Penelope is left home, being courted by many suitors. Bloom makes his own Odyssey through the streets of Dublin on June 16, 1904,
and Molly is left home. She only has one “suitor” today, Blazes Boylan, with whom she has intercourse with, but Bloom famously (and falsely) speculates, in the “Ithaca” episode, that she has had at least twenty-five lovers! But even though Molly does only sleep with one man, the fact remains that she is unfaithful to Bloom, while Penelope in The Odyssey remains faithful. That Joyce embarks from the original tale in this manner should not be regarded lightly. “Joyce redefines the classic image of a faithful ‘Penelope’ to present a self-possessed, adulterous Molly Bloom,” writes Richard Brown in James Joyce and Sexuality (102). The “Penelope” episode not only offers Molly’s perspective of the day’s events and of her relationship with Bloom; it offers a revision of conventional boundaries of gender and sexuality that restricted the lives of women in Joyce’s time.

Here we revert back to the third “P,” policing female sexuality. As discussed earlier, Gerty MacDowell is an example of a woman trying to use her sexuality, masked as coy virginity, to gain a husband, which is her only path towards economic stability. Molly at one time likely went through the same process, and ended up with Leopold Bloom. She has not been highly educated, although she would like to be. In order to increase her sex appeal for Stephen, whom she fantasizes about, Molly says, “‘Ill read and study all I can find or learn a bit off by heart if I knew who he likes so he wont think me stupid if he thinks all women are the same’ (U, 776). The last part, “if he thinks all women are the same,” is a bit disconcerting and might reveal a bit of internalized misogyny in Molly, if she actually believes that all women are stupid and she simply wants to rise above. But regardless, Molly is not highly educated and therefore has to rely on male dominance to secure her economic wellbeing in life.
Molly, as one of the most assertive characters in the novel, is working against a long tradition of misogyny, or at least sexism, in patriarchal societies, Ireland not excluded. As we saw with Gerty’s coy expressions of her sexuality, male dominance typically depends on the perpetuation of female passivity and dormant sexuality. Overt female sexuality is a direct threat to patriarchy. Molly shows quite advanced thinking for her time by recognizing and being disgusted by the nature of her patriarchal society. (In Dublin at that time, a husband legally owned his wife.) She is sickened by the possessiveness with which men treat sex and marriage. Speaking of sexual intercourse with the opposite sex, Molly says, “they always want to see a stain on the bed to know you’re a virgin” (914).

In addition to fighting possessiveness, Molly is also working against a reputation. Because she chooses to be open about her sexuality Molly’s sexual reputation becomes much-speculated about. Molly is much more assertive than Gerty but is labeled a whore by men in Dublin society as well as by her own husband for being friendly with other men. While Bloom assumes she has slept around with many men, she has in fact only slept with one man, Boylan, one time, after more than ten years of sexless marriage with Bloom, with whom she desperately wants to reconnect. Therefore Molly isn’t a prostitute at all, but the label persists. This is what happened to women in Joyce’s time if they didn’t keep up the virgin façade that Gerty so eloquently displays.

In “The Slender Thread: Irish Women on the Southern Avalon,” Willeen Keough writes about the origins of the control of Irish female sexuality in Newfoundland. It originated, he writes, in the development of the middle-class in late nineteenth-century, post-Famine Ireland. The Irish were determined not to retreat to the backwards society
that became victim to the famine—ergo, the Devotional Revolution. Keough writes, “Female sexuality was further constrained as middle-class ideology fashioned a dichotomized construction of woman as either frail, asexual vessel, embodied in the domesticated wife and mother, or temptress Eve, embodied in the prostitute.”

That last line needs some added stress, as it’s very important in the topic of female sexuality: “Temptress, Eve, embodied in the prostitute.” This phrase is very problematic and is representative of thousands of years of justification for female oppression. The Garden of Eden story is perhaps the greatest progenitor of misogyny that ever was, because of the story of the fall from grace. Eve took the apple from the serpent and seduced Adam into eating some as well. Seductive female sexuality, therefore, has been proclaimed throughout history as the source of original sin. No wonder, then, that policing female sexuality has been so rampant! The story has also been used to explain and justify the legal subjugation of women. The logic is as follows: because women are responsible for bringing wickedness into the world, men are superior to women. We find this philosophy in the words of teacher Mr. Deasy in *Ulysses*, speaking to Stephen:

A woman brought sin into the world. For a woman who was no better than she should be, Helen, the wife of Menelaus, ten years the Greeks made war on Troy. A faithless wife first brought the strangers to our shore here, MacMurrough’s wife and her leman O’Rourke, prince of Breffni. A woman too brought Parnell low (43).

The woman that “brought Parnell low” is Kitty O’Shea, the long-time mistress of Irish Home Rule champion Charles Stewart Parnell. After a relationship between Parnell and Kitty O’Shea that lasted over ten years and produced children, Kitty’s husband, Captain O’Shea, filed for divorce. Apparently he was spurred on to do so because of political rivalry; he and Parnell were both Irish MP’s at Westminster (Declan Kiberd
“Notes,” *Ulysses*). Joyce makes reference to the Parnell case several times in many of his works, for several reasons. One is probably that Joyce didn’t believe in the institution of marriage. He himself eloped with Nora Barnacle, so Joyce would have been a supporter of Parnell and Kitty’s relationship. However, the Parnell legacy represents an egregious case of Irish hypocrisy to Joyce. When Captain O’Shea filed for divorce, the unmarried relationship between Kitty and Parnell became a huge scandal and the Irish people basically crucified their leader, their “chosen one” that would lead them into the “promised land” of Home Rule. The Irish people chose to get up on their moral high horse and condemn Parnell publicly, which virtually cost Ireland its independence.

There is an interesting scene in another of Joyce’s works, *Dubliners*, which lays bare the utter duplicity of this moral condemnation. In “Ivy Day in the Committee Room” several gentlemen are sitting around talking politics, as they are campaign workers for a man running for Lord Mayor. One of the men brings up the visit of the new King of England, Edward, to Ireland. Prince Edward by that time had developed a reputation for licentious behavior including lots of drink and many female partners. Mr. O’Connor then asks why they should welcome the King of England to Ireland if Parnell, their hero, would have opposed it vehemently. Mr. Henchy replies with a resounding, “Parnell is dead,” and adds that if the King is taking the time to come see what these “wild Irish” are like, they had better give him a friendly welcome. Mr. Lyons then alludes to the new King Edward’s ill reputation, and Mr. Henchy replies, “Let bygones be bygones…He’s just an ordinary knockabout like you and me. He’s fond of his glass of grog and he’s a bit of a rake, perhaps, and he’s a good sportsman. Damn it, can’t we Irish play fair?” Mr. Lyons then asks him to compare the case with Parnell: “Do you think now after what he
did Parnell was a fit man to lead us? And why, then, would we do it for Edward the Seventh?" This is a very significant comment because Joyce is pointing out the colonial residue that has led the Irish to crucify their own kind while continuing to submit to the English. Mr. Henchy quickly excuses Prince Edward's licentious behavior but not Parnell's affair, which is likely because of post-colonial submissiveness embedded in the Irish psyche.

This post-colonial submissiveness also existed in the gender relations of Ireland in Joyce's time. The need to assert Irish manhood by controlling Irish female sexuality was a direct manifestation of the "need" to fight back and dominate in some form. British domination of the Irish was still very much part of the Irish psyche and Joyce was well aware of it. Pointing out ways that the Irish consciousness was prone to acts and statements of moral duplicity—policing female sexuality, for example, while at the same time paying for prostitutes and watching pornography in a mutoscope—was, one could argue, a favorite pastime of Joyce. The treatment of female sexuality was certainly one such arena of hypocrisy, as we see in *Ulysses*’ hero, Bloom, who falsely speculates that his wife has slept with many lovers while ignoring his own infidelity with Gerty MacDowell and Martha Clifford (with whom he exchanges love letters).

In order to fully understand Joyce’s treatment of female sexuality, the other side of the road must also be considered: male sexuality. While that is certainly not the focus of this essay, some understanding of it is essential. One of the most revolutionary aspects of *Ulysses* is that it uses female sexuality to show that relationships between men and women should not be dominated by the man. Gerty MacDowell shows us women’s sexual power but also their economic concerns about sex and marriage, and Molly does
not only that but also shows us a free marriage of sorts. Joyce ardently believed that marriage was an oppressive institution and that men should not own their wives, which is what marriage at the time meant. Joyce believed in a sort of free love, if you will, and you can see that belief come through in *Ulysses*. Richard Brown writes, in *James Joyce and Sexuality*:

> Free love, in this sense of the recognition of the inadequacy of the matrimonial formulation of the sexual relationship and the presentation of individuals as fundamentally separate from each other…runs through the understanding of relationships in all [Joyce’s] works, whether those relationships be formalized by marriage or not (35).

Just as Gabriel in “The Dead” comes to a final realization that Gretta gave her heart away long ago to Michael Furey and he cannot, nor need not, fully possess her, Bloom also realizes that like the universal snow falling in “The Dead,” like water running through the River Liffey, wives are not something to possess, as dictated by the institution of marriage at the time. It could be argued that Leopold Bloom willingly allows his wife Molly and Blazes Boylan to sleep together on June 16, 1904. He knows of the appointment, has suspicions of their intentions, and yet he does not go home to stop it when he very well could. He might have believed that because he wasn’t having sexual intercourse with Molly (and hadn’t for the last 10 years, since their son Rudy died), then another man should be able to satisfy her. Bloom’s complicity in his wife’s affair is absolutely scandalous; although once we get Molly’s perspective in “Penelope” we realize that he may be more adulterous than she. Indeed, Bloom thought of several other women throughout the day, exchanged love letters with Martha Clifford, and had a sexual experience with Gerty MacDowell, which Molly figures out right away: “yes he came somewhere Im sure,” she says (872). Molly and Bloom’s extramarital sexual
experiences do make an important point: “free love” purges sex of possessiveness, and both man and woman are liberated.

Joyce’s vision of a liberated female sexuality is not particularly new in Irish culture, however little it may be known. Gaelic Ireland supported a rather overt, powerful female sexuality, which is evident in much Celtic folklore. Molly can be easily associated with the Celtic mother goddesses, with Tailltiu in *The Book of Invasions*, and Medb in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, as Bonnie Kime Scott notes in *Joyce and Feminism*. One particularly interesting relation to Gaelic Ireland is the *Sheela na Gig*, a form of pre-Christian artwork from Gaelic Ireland. *Sheela na Gigs* are stone carvings depicting a naked female displaying her reproductive organs in a provocative manner. Scott writes, “A typical Sheela-na-gig is crouched with open crotch, pointing to or even fingering exaggerated genitals” (11). Their meaning is not really known, but theories range from fertility symbols, celebrations of womanhood, *gea tellus*, or Mother Earth, and more recently, that they repel evil spirits. In the medieval ages *Sheela na Gigs* were taken for the most part from their original locations and placed on the north entrance of Norman churches, plausibly to ward off evil spirits from entering the church. But, their original connotations relate directly to Molly Bloom, who is referred to in “Ithaca” as “Gea-Tellus” (870) and is definitely the symbol of a fertility goddess in the novel. (Gea-Tellus refers to the Roman earth goddess Tellus, a symbol of fertility, who was also identified with the Greek goddess Gaea.)

The character Medb in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* is also representative of an earth goddess and relates to the character of Molly Bloom as well. She says to her husband one night, for example, “I never had one man without another waiting in his shadow” (Scott
11). In the “Penelope” episode of *Ulysses*, Molly references many potential admirers, although of course it is important that she actually only sleeps with Boylan. Being sexually desired and enjoying that fact that she is sexually desired is something that surely, Molly and Medb share. This goes back to the second “P,” pleasure. Joyce wanted to show that women could enjoy seduction, arousal, and sexual activity. It is amazing to think that female sexual pleasure could be so radical a notion, but it is something that certainly has been embedded in cultures around the world for many, many years.

The fact that Joyce reaches into Ireland’s past for a more expansive view of female sexuality is brilliant, because it is not a radical call for things unknown; rather, it is a call to Ireland to embrace their cultural history and endorse a treatment of female sexuality that is not oppressive and limiting. As the conduit for fertility and the creation of life, female sexuality should almost be worshipped, as the *Sheela na Gigs* likely were. Also, reaching into Ireland’s cultural history was especially poignant at the time when Joyce was writing because of the contemporary Gaelic Revival movement, led by William Butler Yeats and other literary greats in Dublin.

We have now examined Joyce’s treatment of female sexuality in *Ulysses*, particularly in “Nausicaa” and “Penelope.” What is to be made from all of it? Joyce certainly was aware of the stringent restrictions on female sexuality and the concurrent hypocrisy displayed by pornography and male patronage of prostitutes. However, why would he spend so much time writing about female sexuality? For one thing, as briefly mentioned earlier, Joyce saw the social purity movement (which did not really take on a Catholic dimension until after partition, as Mullin has noted) as an imposition of British control in Ireland, and he sought to define Irish femininity on his own terms. As we see
with Molly and Bloom, Joyce really believed in a feminist vision of female sexuality—that female sexuality should be a source of pleasure and should be expressed freely, rather than policed—and that men and women should engage in sex without any sort of possessiveness, especially the kind that usually came along with marriage. But what Joyce ultimately creates is a reversal of gender roles and prescribed expectations, and this is embodied in Molly’s final memory at the end of the novel. Molly remembers the first time Bloom and she made love, on the hill at Howth: “the day we were lying among the rhododendrons of Howth head in the grey tweed suit and his straw hat the day I got him to propose to me yes first I gave him the bit of seedcake out of my mouth” (931). The fact that she is planting the seed into him is an explicit insemination reversal, representing a subversion of gender roles or even a reversal of the sexes. It could be argued that Joyce is asserting a new vision of human beings as androgynous, but I think it is simply a feminist statement that says to men and women that they need not subscribe to the expectations given their gender in life; rather, they should embrace what they love, come what may. Molly is the more outgoing one of the two, so why should she not initiate the sexual encounter or the marriage proposal? And of course, Molly is so much more than a woman courting a marriage proposal. She and Gerty and all the other women Joyce writes about are harboring under strict guidelines for their sex, guidelines that through revealing the hypocrisy of pornography, the proscription of female sexual pleasure, and the policing of female sexuality, Joyce subverts, as part of his life-long scheme to reorder society through his literature.
Works Cited


