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# Blurring the Lines: The Ambiguity of Gender and Sexuality in *Ulysses*

*Samantha Heffner*

One of the most memorable episodes in James Joyce's *Ulysses* occurs in the "Circe" chapter, when Leopold Bloom is transformed into a woman during his masochistic encounter with Bella Cohen, who herself transforms into a man. This gender swap is often cited as the culmination of Bloom's feminine nature in the novel—not only is he the "new womanly man," but he has also literally become a new woman (16.1798–1799).<sup>1</sup> Such a confusion of gender has inspired a wide array of responses as critics attempt to wrestle with this rather confusing—if endearing—modern Ulysses. Bloom's effeminate nature has also given rise to a body of literature about his sexuality, as queer theory and gender studies began to make their way into Joyce criticism. Stephen has also been examined through these critical lenses, as has Molly, but all three have not been examined together, nor have their genders and sexualities been analyzed with regard to one another. As such, a new reading of *Ulysses*'s complicated central trio is required: *Ulysses* is a book known for its sense of hyperrealism, and in this spirit, the ambiguity of its characters' genders and sexualities must be read as realistic portrayals of gender and sexuality in the modern world. Joyce sought to create characters like the "all-round" man Ulysses, so it follows, then, that his characters' "roundness" would include a more ambiguous

1 All citations of the novel, made parenthetically, refer to James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler (New York: Random House, 1986).

representation of gender and sexual identity. Additionally, Joyce wanted to deconstruct the English language to suit his purposes, and thus he might also choose to deconstruct traditional gender identities to present a new, modernist vision of man and woman, or something in-between. Indeed, a purely heterosexual perspective is too limited for Joyce's aims. Something new, something more worthy of the gravitas and reality of a project like *Ulysses* must therefore be sought beyond the limits of long-established social boundaries.

Before we can delve into the novel, however, we must consider Joyce's personality as a source of this resistance to convention. Joyce was something of a rebellious spirit, someone who did not want to follow popular movements, such as the Irish literary revival, or be associated with common schools of thought, such as socialism—or any politics—later in life. Joyce was frustratingly self-contradicting, “as proud as he was needy” and “affable but impenetrable,” to cite a few choice descriptions.<sup>2</sup> As an artist, he could “attach no importance to political conformity,” was “against every state,” and while he could not “approve of the act of the revolutionary who tosses a bomb in a theatre to destroy the king and his children,” he could hardly fail to acknowledge that “those states [have not] behaved any better ... [having] drowned the world in a blood-bath.”<sup>3</sup> As he aged, he grew more apolitical, preferring to remain “au-dessus de la mêlée,” or above the fray, and he became known more for his literature than his politics.<sup>4</sup> Looking at Joyce's biography, it becomes apparent that he reveled in ambiguity throughout his life, willing to leave people guessing rather than provide any clear-cut answers, especially regarding interpretations of his works. In 1921, for example, he lent his friend, the French writer Valéry Larbaud, an intricate schema of Odyssean parallels for *Ulysses*, claiming it was “to help [Larbaud] confuse the audience a little more,” and later in life, during a visit to Copenhagen, he replied to one acolyte's interpretation of *Ulysses* with a single word: “Perhaps.” His relationship with Nora Barnacle, too, remained outside traditional and official matrimony until nearly thirty years after their elopement, with two grown children and a grandson on the way.<sup>5</sup> Throughout his life, Joyce consistently bucked convention, and it makes sense to see how his art imitated that life.

Indeed, Joyce continued to flout convention with his use of literary tropes, such as the manly epic hero, which, for him, was ripe for adjustment. One of the most deeply embedded characters in the Western literary tradition, the epic hero represented an opportunity for Joyce to attempt to redefine what, exactly,

2 Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 163 and 188.

3 Ellmann, *James Joyce*, 446.

4 Ellmann, *James Joyce*, 386 and 709.

5 Ellmann, *James Joyce*, 519 and 693.

a hero might look like, especially in the new post-World War era. Instead of a strong, valiant man of action like the Homeric Ulysses or any of his descendants, Joyce made his modern hero a “new womanly man” to rock the boat, as it were, as well as to push against the boundaries of traditional literary narratives. Part of the design of *Ulysses* is to play with the reader’s expectations based on its central titular allusion, turning many of the associations with the Homeric epic on their heads. And, of course, he does this in several ways—the “odyssey” of *Ulysses* only covers a few miles within a single city, and its heroes are at once painfully ordinary and yet also extraordinarily peculiar. The characters themselves are rather ambiguous, and, as shown above, Joyce felt ambiguously about nearly everything, from his relationship to Ireland and Irish nationalism, to his own inability to tell those closest to him that he loved them.<sup>6</sup> As such, it follows that his meticulously constructed characters would reflect these ambiguities in their very natures.

Many critics have examined this ambiguity within the context of the characters’ genders, and many have considered their sexuality, but no one has necessarily looked at both aspects of identity in conjunction, and no one has done a thorough study of the three main characters all together. This is problematic, since many queer identities are indeed linked to the person’s gender—people can identify along a queer spectrum, but they can also identify along a gendered spectrum. Members of the gay and lesbian community express their genders differently—some more masculine, some more feminine, and some who combine both, identifying as androgynous or gender-queer. Thus, it makes sense to look at the characters of *Ulysses* in a similar fashion as our understandings of sexual and gender identity expand and grow, and especially since the novel presents us with a character as odd and fascinating as Leopold Bloom.

Before Bloom, however, comes Stephen Dedalus. The first of the three central characters introduced in the novel, Stephen quickly thwarts any expectations of classical Greek heroism that the title—and sunny Buck Mulligan—set up. Our introduction to Stephen plays out almost like a joke, as Joyce begins the Telemachiad—ostensibly a story about a young hero coming of age—with “stately, plump Buck Mulligan” parodying a Catholic Mass with the gusto that one might expect of a fledgling hero (1.1). Stephen, in contrast, is “displeased and sleepy,” still in mourning for his mother and determined to hold a grudge against Mulligan for an offhanded, yet hurtful, comment about his mother’s death (1.13). This “anti-portrait of the young male ‘hero,’” as Vicki Mahaffey puts it, helps the reader identify that this novel is going to have little to do with

6 Ellmann, *James Joyce*, 126.

the conventions on which it allegedly draws.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, as we come to know Stephen, we find a hero who is not physically strong, morally courageous, or deeply inspirational, as the text's evocations of the princely Telemachus and Hamlet might suggest. Rather, we get a hero who is afraid of dogs, fears thunderstorms, is a weak swimmer, and is easily knocked down by a drunken British soldier. Indeed, he is "toothless Kinch" (1.708), "a scrawny intellectual who is poor, physically dirty, periodically infested with vermin, and a coward."<sup>8</sup> He is very nearly the opposite of the images of glamorous young heroes we see in other classic pieces of literature, like Achilles, Odysseus, Aeneas, and Beowulf, who are all aggressive, hyper-masculine creatures. Like Bloom, Stephen is a man with notably feminine energies. He is not Buck Mulligan, who, heroically enough, had saved a man from drowning soon before the novel's beginning. Stephen "would want to. I would try. I am not a strong swimmer. ... Waters: bitter death: lost" (3.323-324, 330). He is introverted, physically unimposing, and melancholic, all traits that undermine any claims of virile masculinity. He is more or less androgynous, neither the traditional "manly man" nor a "new womanly man," but rather something in between.

This androgyny is not to be disparaged, however, even by Stephen himself. Indeed, androgyny is an important part of the aesthetic theory he propounds in "Scylla and Charybdis." In his theory, an encounter with a sexually powerful woman allows a man to reach a state of "artistic androgyny that enables the male artist ... to conceive, gestate, and reproduce himself in the form(s) of imaginative drama."<sup>9</sup> This is a notably passive sexual experience that, according to Stephen, an artist needs in order to make good literature. It is also one that is specifically female, since it recalls the cycle of conception, pregnancy, and birth. Of course, Joyce himself "imagined the ideal male artist as at least partly female," so it should be unsurprising that one of his personae also comes to the same conclusion. Indeed, genius is called a "queer thing" by more than one character, and it is no accident that Joyce uses the word "queer" to modify and define genius (9.303, 432). "Queer" originally meant that something was strange or odd, but by the late nineteenth century, it was becoming the pejorative word for homosexuality that we now know today, and it is quite possible that Joyce was aware of its shifting meaning.<sup>10</sup> At this time, too, the stereotype "of the homosexual man as 'feminine' and 'artistic' was still very much alive.

7 Vicki Mahaffey, "Ulysses and the End of Gender," in *Masculinities in Joyce: Postcolonial Constructions*, ed. Christine van Boheemen-Saaf and Colleen Lamos (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001) 140.

8 Mahaffey, "End of Gender," 140.

9 David Weir, "A Womb of His Own: Joyce's Sexual Appeal," *James Joyce Quarterly* 31 (1994): 207.

10 See *OED* s.v. "queer" adj.<sup>1</sup> 3, with examples of use.

... The 'androgynous' homosexual was also more likely than almost any other type of person to be artistic."<sup>11</sup> Again, successful artistic creation is linked to gender ambiguity as well as to sexual ambiguity, if not sexual deviance. Mr. Best argues that "the most brilliant of all is that story of Wilde's," the *Portrait of Mr. W. H.*, which was an attempt to discover the identity of the male dedicatee of a large portion of Shakespeare's sonnets (9.522). Oscar Wilde was, of course, the premier model of the effete male artist, and to argue that his work is "the most brilliant of all," even if such a claim is made by a relatively minor character, is to reinforce the idea that homosexuality, especially in men, leads to good art.

Stephen falls into this pattern of uncertain, somewhat effeminate sexuality. He certainly seems to entertain a number of uncertainties about his sexuality, most notably in the "Proteus" chapter:

His gaze brooded on his broadtoed boots, a buck's castoffs, *nebeneinander*. He counted the creases of rucked leather wherein another's foot has nested warm. The foot that beat the ground in tripudium, foot I dislove. But you were delighted when Esther Osvalt's shoe went on you: girl I knew in Paris. *Tiens, quel petit pied!* Staunch friend, a brother soul: Wilde's love that dare not speak its name. His arm: Cranly's arm. He now will leave me. And the blame? As I am. As I am. All or not at all. (3.446-452)

Though melancholic, this passage conveys considerable information about Stephen and Mulligan's relationship. Their sharing of shoes, for example, implies a certain amount of intimacy between the two men, since it means that both men inhabit the same space, small as it may be, and that both share something that belongs to the two of them alone. The fact that Mulligan's foot is "nested warm" within the shoe also recalls a kind of bodily intimacy, and it is as Stephen begins to think more about Mulligan that "Wilde's love that dare not speak its name" comes up. Though Stephen may "dislove" Mulligan, this word still introduces the idea of love, and as Stephen continues this train of thought, he compares Mulligan to Cranly, Stephen's "staunch friend" and "brother soul" from *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. He thinks, "He now will leave me," even though it is Stephen who left Mulligan and Haines at the beach with no plans of returning to the Martello Tower, indicating a strong attachment and a reluctance to let go of the relationship. Furthermore, even as Stephen considers Mulligan as competition, or a usurper, he is "sensitive to homosexual feelings in himself and observant of homosexual behavior in others."<sup>12</sup> This includes

11 Weir, "Womb of His Own," 213.

12 Weir, "Womb of His Own," 224.

Mulligan, as when Stephen notes the “manner of Oxenford” of Mulligan’s behavior, referring to the close association between Oxford and homosexuality (9.1212). Stephen also fits the stereotypical profile of a homosexual “as effeminate momma’s boy,” as his obsession with his dead mother “induces a degree of cross-gender identification” that cannot be resolved by Oedipal conflicts.<sup>13</sup> Even his feet provide markers for homosexuality; they are small, feminine, and thus further emphasize Stephen’s androgyny. And while the text by no means explicitly states anything confirming Stephen’s latent homosexuality, these subtle cues certainly complicate his character and relate to the difficulties facing his conception of himself as an aspiring artist.

Stephen’s ambiguous sexuality—as well as his ambivalent feelings about sexuality—are part of the larger theme of ambiguity in the text. His lack of aggression and his small feet suggest Stephen’s femininity, and he exhibits a certain amount of latent homosexuality that is exacerbated by Mulligan’s playful banter, as when he answers Stephen’s prodding “Tell me, Mulligan” with “Yes, my love?” (1.4748). While the text certainly does not make any explicit claims of homosexuality, the tension is there nonetheless, and it does explain Stephen’s inability to imagine successful intercourse with a woman: “She, she, she. What she?” (3.426). Indeed, when Bloom offers to let Stephen spend the night, thus implicitly “offering” Stephen the chance to spend the night with Molly, a woman who is undoubtedly the sexually powerful Anne Hathaway figure Stephen’s theory calls for, he rejects the offer “promptly, inexplicably, with amicability, gratefully” (17.955). Thus, it seems that Stephen’s inability to understand his own sexual desires has prevented him from partaking in the very sexual experience he himself has labeled necessary for artistic development. This could be what Joseph Valente refers to as Stephen’s “gynophobia,” which also partially explains the dread he feels every time the subject of his mother is brought up.<sup>14</sup> Whether or not Stephen is truly attracted to women is still questionable, as Stephen himself does not seem to know. As such, this ambiguity in Stephen’s sexual desires seems to be a very realistic portrayal of someone questioning their sexual identity: he is still in search of who he is, who he is meant to be, and who he likes. Stephen is young, and perhaps more roaming the Sandymount Strand will reveal the answers to him.

Bloom, in contrast, is old enough to have a more solidified sense of identity than the younger Stephen. Yet he is just as androgynous, if not more so. A “different kind of hero,” Bloom defies “the traditions of epic and romance ... [thus redefining] a male hero as neither brave nor vengeful but as

13 Joseph Valente, “The Perils of Masculinity in ‘Scylla and Charybdis,’” in *Ulysses: En-Gendered Perspectives*, ed. Kimberly Devlin and Marilyn Reizbaum (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 126.

14 Valente, “Perils of Masculinity,” 127.



cautious [and] realistic.”<sup>15</sup> Rather than the “emphatically physical” male hero with “the power of brute force and a willingness to use that force to protect,” he is instead a “thinking, caring [man] who [is]—like most people—prone to self-deception and error.”<sup>16</sup> He too is androgynous, and like Stephen he fails the “two traditionally most important tests of masculinity: physical prowess and sexual conquest.”<sup>17</sup> Bloom comes up short when considered in light of the ideas of Christian manliness that dominated the late nineteenth century, emphasizing “rock-hard, disciplined, heterosexual virility,” and his cuckolding by Molly and Boylan is a testament to his inability to fulfill his sexual duties as husband.<sup>18</sup> In “Ithaca” we learn that Bloom has a “firm full masculine feminine passive active hand,” the description of which contains equal parts of each gender (17.289–290). He is, however, potentially more feminine than masculine: he enjoys making Molly breakfast, he admits in “Circe” to having “tried [Molly’s] things on only twice, a small prank, in Holles street,” and Molly informs us that one of the main reasons she liked Bloom during their courtship was the she “saw he understood or felt what a woman is” (15.2986–2987; 18.1578–1579). In “Circe,” he becomes “not man” but “Woman,” and Bello places a ring on the womanly Bloom’s finger, thus claiming her as his wife. In addition, Bloom is motherly—he is much closer to the fifteen-year-old Milly than is Molly, receiving a letter addressed to “Dearest Papli,” while Molly only receives a small postcard (4.397). He also “remember[s] the summer morning she was born,” and he thinks “with troubled affection” about her growing up with a concern that might belong more usually to a mother than a father: “O, well: she knows how to mind herself. But if not? No, nothing has happened. Of course it might. Wait in any case till it does. . . . Destiny. Ripening now. Vain: very” (4.416–417, 432, 428–431). Additionally, Milly is one of the only characters we see who appreciates and even respects Bloom’s intellectual airs: “She admired: a natural phenomenon having been explained by him to her she expressed the immediate desire to possess without gradual acquisition a fraction of his science, the moiety, the quarter, a thousandth part” (17.925–928). Like Stephen’s identification with his mother, Bloom exhibits a cross-gender identification with his daughter, implying an innate femininity that Molly apparently does not possess.

And indeed, the “touch of the artist” that Lenehan ascribes to Bloom is once again linked to the more effeminate aestheticism of artists like Oscar

15 Mahaffey, “End of Gender,” 144.

16 Mahaffey, “End of Gender,” 146–47.

17 Piotr Sadowski, “Androgyny and (near) Perfect Marriage: A Systems View of the Genders of Leopold and Molly Bloom,” *Style* 44 (2010): 147.

18 Tracy Teets Schwartz, *Joyce and the Victorians* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), 72.



Wilde. Bloom even has an encounter with a sexually powerful woman in the form of Bella Cohen, thus falling perfectly into the conditions described by Stephen in “Scylla and Charybdis.” And while Bloom does not exhibit the same latent homosexuality as Stephen, he still cannot be described as safely heterosexual. For example, the “enigmatic sexual identity” of D. B. Murphy in the cabman’s shelter “incites homosexual paranoia” in Bloom, who fears “being thought homosexual” by others.<sup>19</sup> Despite this studied ignorance of homosexual cues on Bloom’s part, Colleen Lamos points out that “the implicit, domesticized portrayal of male same-sex affection embodied by Bloom and Stephen, who walk off arm-in-arm at the end of the episode ... [protects them] from homophobic retribution by their apparent ignorance.”<sup>20</sup> Bloom, like Stephen, fears homosexual identification, and since Murphy is Bloom’s shady double in the episode, his “obscure sexuality” is mirrored in Bloom, thus complicating his sexual identity.<sup>21</sup> Murphy’s tattoo, for example, is imbued with homosexual codes: he explains that the tattoo was done by Antonio, “a Greek,” and when asked about the number, he gives the questioner a knowing “half smile” and says, “A Greek he was” (16.679; 698–699). Lamos explains, “Antonio is not a Greek name, suggesting that his emphatic Greekness has to do with nonracial characteristics associated with the number sixteen. ... Antonio’s Greekness lies in the Greek vice,” implying pederasty, which has been associated with homosexual behavior since the term’s advent in the late nineteenth century.<sup>22</sup> Earlier in the text, when Bloom arrives at the library in the middle of Stephen’s presentation, Buck Mulligan says, “He knows you ... O, I fear me, he is Greeker than the Greeks,” planting the seed that will sprout seven chapters later (9.614–615). Furthermore, “Eumaeus” is the sixteenth chapter, thus imbuing the entire episode with an overtone of homosexuality. Bloom, however, studiously ignores all of these cues, and uses “the face of a streetwalker glazed and haggard” peering “round the door of the shelter” to distract himself from this highly homoerotic moment (16.704–705). Thus, Murphy remains Bloom’s “abjected alter ego,” as well as his “queer other.”<sup>23</sup> Bloom succeeds in separating himself from a homosexual identity, but as readers we understand that there is more than meets the eye.

Of course, Bloom’s penchant for passive masochism marks his desire to perhaps occupy the more feminine side of a sexual encounter, as passivity has

19 Colleen Lamos, “The Double Life of ‘Eumaeus,’” in *Ulysses: En-Gendered Perspectives*, ed. Devlin and Reizbaum, 246 and 248.

20 Lamos, “Double Life,” 248.

21 Lamos, “Double Life,” 247.

22 Lamos, “Double Life,” 250.

23 Lamos, “Double Life,” 250.

long been associated with the feminine, rather than the masculine.<sup>24</sup> His transformation into a woman in the middle of “Circe” reinforces this idea, and the declaration by Dr. Mulligan that Bloom is “bisexually abnormal” and that “ambidexterity is also latent” only further cements Bloom’s androgynous nature (15.1775–1776; 1780). Bello refers to him in androgynous terms, too: “Touch and examine his points. Handle him” (15.3103). During Molly’s conclusive internal monologue she thinks about how she liked Bloom when they got engaged “because [she] saw he understood or felt what a woman is” (18.1578–1579). When Bloom is trying to get Stephen to come to his house to spend the night in “Eumaeus,” his parental concern for the younger man has the warm cadence of motherliness: “At least he would be in safe hands and as warm as a toast on a trivet he [Bloom] failed to perceive any very vast amount of harm in that always with the proviso no rumpus of any sort was kicked up” (16.1622–1625). Bloom is a caretaker, not only taking care of the horribly drunk Stephen, but also of Molly by making breakfast, of Milly before she left the house, and even of the cat (4.24–38). In “Circe,” which acts as the novel’s dark subconscious, Bloom himself admits, “O, I so want to be a mother,” before giving birth to eight children (16.1817). This confusion of gender roles, as well as temperaments, lines up with Joyce’s tendency to play with conventions.

Indeed, such maternal qualities are not present in Molly, who gets the last word of the novel. The portrait Joyce paints of Molly is hardly one of passive, gentle femininity—the kind embodied by Gerty MacDowell, who is, “in very truth, as fair a specimen of winsome Irish girlhood as one could wish to see” (13.80–81). Molly, in contrast, projects herself as “aggressive and even masculine,” the other side of the coin of the Blooms’ marriage.<sup>25</sup> Molly detests traditional feminine duties: she “hates sewing” (8.1119), hates “bandaging and dosing” (18.31), and is rankled by Bloom’s request for breakfast in bed (18.929–932). She desires phallic experiences, such as firing a pistol (18.835), “being a man and [getting] up on a lovely woman” (18.1146–1147), and even simply having a penis: “I wished I was [a man] myself for a change just to try with that thing they have swelling up on you so hard and at the same time so soft” (18.1381–1383). Yet this penis envy is not the same as that of Ibsen’s Hedda Gabbler; Molly still revels in her femininity, and she relishes her feminine sexuality. She considers her breasts “so plump and tempting,” and admits “they excite myself sometimes” (18.1378–1379). She also fantasizes about seducing a younger man with her womanly wiles: “a young boy would like me Id confuse him a little alone with him if we were Id let him see my garters the new ones and make him turn red looking at him seduce him” (18.85–87). Thus, this

24 Deborah South Richardson, “The Myth of Female Passivity: Thirty Years of Revelations About Female Aggression,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 29 (2005): 238.

25 Mahaffey, “End of Gender,” 155.

combination of womanly erotic voluptuousness and manly sexual assertiveness contributes to this continuing theme of androgyny and ambiguity. Indeed, Molly defines Bloom's identity in a way husbands would often define their wives' identities: people refer to Bloom through his relation to "Madam Marion Tweedy" rather than referring to Molly as "Mrs. Leopold Bloom." Molly also seems to have been the active party in her relationship with Bloom—she initiates the sexual encounter in which Rudy was probably conceived ("Give us a touch, Poldy. God, I'm dying for it"), she asks Bloom to ask her to marry him ("I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me"), and as they celebrated their new engagement together, she "drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad" (6.80-81; 18.1605-1608). In the culmination of both the book and Molly's memories of their engagement at Howth, Molly seems to take on the romantic role of the man, drawing Bloom with his racing heart into her arms after having asked him to ask her to marry him. It is Molly who decides whether she will go along with Bloom's request for breakfast in bed the next morning, and Molly who thinks about seducing Bloom, thinks about "[making] him want me" (18.1539). Where Bloom is passive, Molly is active; where Bloom is a masochist, Molly displays her own sadistic tendencies; where Bloom is feminine, Molly is masculine—and these two androgynous characters balance each other out, whether they are aware of it or not.

Molly also "has the power to look" through the male gaze, playing "both the designated male and female sides of the gaze." She often "exhibits herself for men, yet she also looks at men, at women, and at herself."<sup>26</sup> Colleen Lamos connects this, then, to Molly's "latent lesbianism," which shows itself in her semi-homoerotic experience with Hester Stanhope. Indeed, while Molly exhibits perhaps the least homoerotic desire of the three central characters, her relationship with Hester does have some implicating undertones. Lamos cites "her night with Stanhope," which "retains the putative innocence of a slumber party but with the titillating suggestion of a soft-core fantasy," and argues that "although Molly betrays no consciousness of the erotic energies in her friendship with Stanhope, Joyce was aware of its homosexual implications" due to his close ties to so many lesbians in his life in Paris.<sup>27</sup> And indeed, when Hester must leave, never to return to Molly's life, "she kissed me [Molly] six or seven times didnt I cry yes I believe I did or near it my lips were taittering when I said goodbye she had a Gorgeous wrap of some special kind of blue colour on her" (18.672-675). The tearful farewell can certainly be read as a touching moment between two very close friends, but the kissing and appreciation of

26 Lamos, "'A Faint Glimmer of Lesbianism' in Joyce," in *Quare Joyce*, ed. Joseph Valente (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 192.

27 Lamos, "Faint Glimmer," 191.

Hester's appearance does introduce homoerotic undertones. Thus, the nature of their relationship is left ambiguous, much like the sexualities of Bloom and Stephen. Molly also includes Hester in the list of people Bloom was unaware of during their time at Howth ("he didnt know of Mulvey and Mr Stanhope and Hester"), and this can imply that Hester belongs in the list of people Molly has loved both before and after her marriage to Bloom (18.1582-1583).

The ambiguous natures of the central characters of *Ulysses* are part of Joyce's larger project of creating the "all-round" man in his new modern hero. Bloom is not the only "all-round" character, however, and an analysis of Stephen, Bloom, and Molly's genders and sexualities reveals a desire to look past conventional gender tropes. In doing so, Joyce makes the reader engage with these gendered differences in a critical way, not, as Mahaffey suggests, to attack such conventions, but rather to point to them, have the reader notice them, and spark a discussion that might take popular sentiments away from overtly gendered movements, such as the hyper-masculine brand of Irish nationalism parodied in the character of the Citizen in "Cyclops." Joyce seems to want to point us away from "the notion that any essence, any 'pure' selfhood exists beyond and above the scriptings of culture," as Cheryl Herr states, and, more narrowly, beyond the scripts of gender and sexuality.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, these are, in reality, constructs that do not reflect the truth of how people identify with regards to gender and sexuality. In many ways, Joyce's highly ambiguous characters are secretly hyper-realistic portrayals of how gender and sexuality manifest themselves in normal, ordinary people, people who, like Bloom, Molly, and Stephen, are not the irreproachable and unreachable figures of the classical world the novel's title evokes. Bloom is no Odysseus, Stephen is no Telemachus, and Molly is certainly no Penelope; rather, they are almost painfully real, and their ambiguous relations to gender and sexuality are only one facet of this type of hyperrealism. Indeed, *Ulysses* recognizes that sexuality and gender are "sheer theatre, at least on the social stage," and the way in which Joyce plays with the boundaries of his characters' identities leads us to conclude that conventional ideas, including those of what is womanly and what is manly, are not universal truths, and are meant to be poked and prodded with the same questioning scrutiny that Joyce focused on every aspect of life.<sup>29</sup>

*Samantha Heffner is a senior majoring in English and history. She prepared this essay as part of Dr. David Rando's seminar on James Joyce's Ulysses (ENGL 4426, Fall 2015).*

28 Cheryl Herr, "One Good Turn Deserves Another: Theatrical Cross-Dressing in Joyce's 'Circe' Episode," *Journal of Modern Literature* 11 (1984): 273.

29 Herr, "One Good Turn," 276.

