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Symbolism and the Fact of Matter: History, Politics, Journalism, and Waste in James Joyce's *Ulysses*

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ABSTRACT

Joyce uses excrement in *Ulysses* (1922) not only to bridge the gap between literature and reality, but as a gateway to history as waste, journalism as irrelevant, and the politics that influences them both. Critic Valérie Bénéjam says that looking at feces through a symbolic lens is problematic because it takes away from the physicality of the act. Joyce is able to convey both the reality and the symbolism attached to the expulsion of human waste. Leopold Bloom's trip to the bathroom breaks down a barrier between what can and cannot be written about in literature. Instead of writing about fecal matter in a satirical or overtly humorous way, this particular bowel movement possesses a frankness about the body and its function that was unheard of in the 1920s and even now is considered impolite. Joyce's ability to layer frankness and history, and journalism and politics comes from his need to create the "new now" as opposed to the news of the now. Rather than printing titbits, he carefully constructs the new now using the thought by thought stream of consciousness of Bloom and the nutritious bits of history, leaving the waste behind.

KEYWORDS

Irish Nationalism, James Joyce, Journalism, New Now, Scatology

James Joyce expands the literary wealth on excrement in literature in his *Ulysses* (1922). Joyce bridges the gap between reality and literature by depicting one of life's mundanities through the character of Leopold Bloom. History, journalism, and politics in Ireland are represented or connected to each other by Bloom's fecal matter. History is the waste of time and civilization; journalism, the news of the day, is only relevant for that day and then becomes the paper that wipes the excrement off the people who read them yesterday; and politics influenced both history and the *Freeman's Journal*, an Irish nationalist paper, and *Titbits*, an English tabloid.

Valérie Bénéjam—a Modern Literature and Irish Literature researcher, critic, and lecturer at the Université de Nantes—suggests that working with food, digestive processing, and the end result of feces is sometimes problematic in how the symbolic significance takes precedence over the actual physicality and materiality of the action in her essay “Innards and Titbits: Joyce's Digestive Revolution in the Novel.” However, it is difficult not to speak about excrement symbolically especially within Joyce's works, and specifically *Ulysses* for the purpose of this essay, when symbolism is such a large part of understanding the different layers and motivations behind an act that is often overlooked in literature.

Doctors Alan Bradshaw and Robin Canniford, both professors of Marketing and Management at Royal Holloway University of London and University of Melbourne, say in “Excremental Theory Development” that “aversion to excreta has arisen without due concern for health or hygiene but instead as an ossification of symbolic levels” (108). When social and economic meaning and pressure is applied to keep that part of life private, the topic, by definition, becomes taboo, discouraging forthright discussion and effectively causing shock and awe when it is discussed. Therefore, excrement is privatized for the sake of propriety. Talking about excrement in a candid fashion goes

against everything we have been taught, so it is either discussed symbolically, whereby it can be damaging by clouding truthful meaning and importance, or it is discussed as a humorous device. Bradshaw and Canniford, citing Simon Critchley, Slavoj Zizek, and Norbert Elias, suggest that waste is considered uproarious for the simple reason that we are the least human—that is, stripped of our postured humanity—when defecating. Critchley posits that the very act of defecation is inherently humorous as it strips away the hilarious facade through which a person has to act like a person. Like Elias, the presence of this bodily function stands for the absence of the delicate airs and graces that support our social selves, reducing us to disgusting food processing machines who are unable to control basic shameful urges (qtd. in Bradshaw and Canniford 108).

Though Bloom's costiveness implies an apparent lack of control over his bodily function, it also exhibits a kind of self-governance over his "basic shameful urges": he chooses what to eat, his body holds on to its waste, and he controls the excretion by taking a laxative. It is Joyce's frankness about Bloom's body and its functions that possess humor; however, beneath that humor is commentary on history, journalism, and politics in Ireland and England in the early twentieth century.

The reader is introduced to Leopold Bloom through his preferred, meaty dishes:

Mr. Leopold Bloom ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls. He liked thick giblet soup, nutty gizzards, a stuffed roast heart, liver slices fried with crust crumbs, fried hencod's roes. Most of all he liked grilled mutton kidneys which gave to his palate a fine tang of faintly scented urine. (*Ulysses* II.4.45)

In the meat market, organs were the cheapest part of the animal and were therefore purchased by people with lower incomes, but Bloom genuinely relishes the innards of beast and fowl. Bloom is a consumer of cheap foods leading to his incidents of constipation.

The reader is given a link to political happenings in 1904 between Ireland, England, Great Britain, and France through these specific organ-based dishes. Thick giblet soup is attributed to Greater Britain, which includes Ireland, much to most of the Irish Catholic population's chagrin. The Catholic population of Ireland was intensely, profoundly, and violently for Irish home rule which would sever them from Britain completely (McConnel; "Education in Great Britain and Ireland"). Giblets are an amalgamation of the innards of a fowl, representing, in this case, the countries England colonized. If the soup represents Great Britain, then the individual pieces of meat represent Ireland, Scotland, India, and so forth.

France is the stuffed roast heart. In 1904, France and Britain reaffirmed their intentions to remain peaceful and prosperous with one another in an agreement called *Entente Cordiale*. These two "natural and necessary enemies" sign a document solidifying peace and enabling trade" (*Entente Cordiale*; Embry). This could be France offering up its heart to England, but with half of Ireland violently rebelling against their rule, to refuse a political alliance with a powerful country would be diplomatically illogical.

If food is thought of as history—Irish and English and their relations to other countries—then history is waste or will be soon enough. Catherine Whitley in her "Nations and the Night: Excremental History in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood*" says, "History itself is figured as a waste product, ejected by the peristalsis¹ of a nation's forward movement in time" (81). Joyce seems to be embodying European history through food, creating in Bloom the power to consume current political events and become the conduit for the nations to expel their pasts. However, if history is waste, then it is also fertile; it is recyclable, so there is an opportunity in the future for something fruitful to spring from the waste. But Bloom is costive; he does not want to let go of the past and has to take a "tabloid of cascada sagrada" (*Ulysses* II.4.56) to actively move on from yesterday's constipation.

Bénéjam draws attention to a particularly interesting quote from the philosopher and Joyce scholar, Andrew Mitchell, in his “Excremental Self-Creation in *Finnegans Wake*”:

To think excrement is to encounter life. A life that is not eternal, but intensely finite. A life that must devour and consume in order to grow; a life which consequently dies. To take shit seriously is to become a student of this life and to understand it at the level of process. Life lives through expulsion. Joyce is an author of life and our greatest thinker of shit. (qtd in Bénéjam 31)

Joyce bridges the gap between reality and literature in this honest depiction of one of life’s mundanities. The process of excrement is an ongoing cycle, just as history is cyclical. History is happening every second; every moment that has passed is dead. However, history holds within it a vast wealth of knowledge. History is a fertilizer for the brain. Joyce knew that connecting the past to the present by extracting the vitalizing nutrients from the otherwise useless muck would propel him into the future of literature; he just had to choose the history that was relevant to his new now².

Bloom thinks about the people that work in a journal publishing house as animals on a farm:

He held the page from him: interesting: reading it nearer, the title, the blurred cropping cattle, the page rustling. A young white heifer. Those mornings in the cattlemarket, the beasts lowing their pens, branded sheep, flop and fall of dung, the breeders in hobnailed boots trudging through the litter, slapping a palm on a ripemeated hindquarter, there’s a prime one, unpeeled sandwiches in their hands. He held the page aslant patiently, bending his senses and his will, his soft subject gaze at rest. (*Ulysses*, II.4.48)

Bloom is comparing journalists and their publishers to animals, specifically, cattle, beasts, and branded sheep. The cattle market is the newsroom; the beasts and the sheep are the workers; the breeders the bosses that strain any innovation and creativity from the herd and slaughter them for this naked, sensual,

carnivorous pleasure; and the ‘flop and fall of dung’ is the writing. The “now” journalism is already history by the time anyone writes it, before a reader can digest the news; so instead, they digest their food and use yesterday’s tabloid for today’s outhouse paper.

Though these comments are not particularly flattering, Bloom is very calm about them. Bloom sees the world in a visceral, corporeal way that others have been culturally bred to believe is not polite or socially acceptable, making him the perfect candidate to bring honest excrement to life in literature.

On his way to the bathroom, Bloom thinks about animals and their waste; he thinks about how dung is a necessary fertilizer for prosperous plant life. He also thinks over “dirty cleans”:

A coat of silver Sulphur. All soil like that without dung. Household slops. Loam, what is this that is? The hens in the next garden: their droppings are very good top dressing. Best of all though are the cattle, especially when they are fed on those oilcakes. Mulch of dung. Best thing to clean ladies’ gloves. Dirty cleans. Ashes too.
(*Ulysses*. II.4.55-6)

Without the animal dung, the soil would not be fertilized, plants would not grow as well, and Ireland might not be so green. The animals are the “food processing machines” Bradshaw and Canniford suggest that humans are, but the bodily function and the end result of the processed food ultimately creates and maintains life. Something that is considered dirty, inappropriate, and taboo helps inspire health, wealth, and prosperity. The idea that something dirty can clean another thing is connected to this life cycle—cow eats grass, or “oilcakes,” cow makes waste, dung fertilizes plants, cow eats plants—in how it is not something that is talked about or thought of, if it can be helped, because it is a strange inversion of what is presented as truth. The dirty thing, the body creating feces and the feces itself, is cleaning out the body. The waste only truly becomes dirty once it leaves the body.

Having this account of animalian dung and how it is useful before Bloom makes it to the outhouse sets the reader up for the account of human feces to come. It allows the reader to approach Bloom's morning constitutional³ from a more comfortable place, because animal excrement is easier to endure than human fecal matter. Joyce uses the animal dung to ease the readers into the expulsion of human feces, perhaps so as not to offend those delicate sensibilities society has developed about a natural process.

This introduction also compares Bloom's feces to the more useful animal dung by the sheer proximity of the two passages within the text. Humans are more divorced from their bodily functions than animals are from theirs; however, Bloom is written as more frank with his bodily functions than the average literary character. There is a certain level of equality between Bloom and the animals. Bloom is very much the carnivorous animal: he eats the organs of other animals and he thinks of his feces in terms of, or at least in close proximity to, animal fecal matter. Bloom is more in touch with his base, animalistic instincts, making his comfort level with his body and bodily function easier for him to accept as a fact of life and for the reader to understand. People find it difficult to identify with animals and embrace their excrement because they find it "shameful, not because of its husk, but because in it we expose and externalize our innermost intimacy" (Bradshaw and Canniford 106). It is not that Bloom does not feel that shame, but that in some way he has blocked himself from that innermost intimacy.

Bloom kicks open the door of the outhouse, careful not to get his pants dirty, and the reader enters into a literary space that has been seldom occupied and never in the same capacity:

Quietly he read, restraining himself, the first column and yielding, but resisting, began the second. Midway, his last resistance yielding, he allowed his bowels to ease themselves quietly as he read, reading still patiently that slight constipation of yesterday quite gone. Hope it's not too big bring on piles again. No, just

right. So. Ah! Costive. One tabloid of cascara sagrada. Life might be so. It did not move or touch him but it was something quick and neat. Print anything now. Silly season. He read on, seated calm above his own rising smell. Neat certainly. *Matcham often thinks of the masterstroke by which he won the laughing witch who now. Begins and ends morally.* (*Ulysses*, II. 4. 56)

Bloom is measuring his bowel movement with the column in the tabloid *Titbits* which starts the parallels between the excrement and journalism. He, his body, has been holding on to the feces since the day before and this issue of *Titbits* is yesterday's edition. He likens the tabloid to the laxative, cascada sagrada, he took to get his bowels moving. Joyce intersperses moments of movement with thoughts on the piece in the tabloid. The story does not move him emotionally, but he is moved physically; it was quick and neat, like his expulsion. The phrase "print anything now" implies that the story is shit and that the institution of journalism is not much better. The article "begins and ends morally," just as the fecal process begins and ends naturally. Like food, journalism is of the present, of the now, but they are both temporary and become waste and rag a day later.

It is speculated that the story in *Titbits*, *Matcham's Masterstroke*, is a piece of Joyce's lost, unpublished juvenilia, so he could be mocking himself for past works, adding to the idea that history is waste and yesterday's writing is shit. Joyce was a journalist in his early days and managed to get his novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), serialized in the *Egoist* from February 1914 to September 1915; *Ulysses* began serialization in the *Little Review* in March 1918, but "a complaint from the Society for the Suppression of Vice stopped publication" in 1920, making him familiar with the news of the now (*Dubliners* 231).

Jour in French means "day"; journalism is the news of the day or the news of the moment. In some ways, the novel itself is a *nouvelle du jour* because it takes place over the course of one day—June 16, 1904—but its thickness and

style sets it apart from any other type of literary publication. Joyce set out to write a novel that would makeover the now. The now that people were used to was journalism that would “print anything now.” The titbits⁴ in *Titbits* and the *Freeman’s Journal* are the in the moment, no substance, unable to touch or move, now that he writes *Ulysses* to defy, redefine, and create new. It is a carefully constructed stream of consciousness that thought by thought creates Bloom’s, and Stephen’s, present.

However, Joyce does not use the *Freeman’s Journal* as the rag⁵ that wipes up after Bloom is finished, but the *Titbit*, an English publication. Joyce was a nationalist and a pacifist so the turn for the violent that the radical nationalists took after Charles Stewart Parnell died put a wedge between nationalism and Joyce in that they advocated for different means for an end to British rule of Ireland. Parnell was a leading figure in Irish nationalism and home rule whose political career and personal life was decimated after he was cited in the O’Shea divorce case as Mrs. O’Shea’s lover and betrayed by his friend, Timothy Healy, in November 1890. He died soon after and became viewed as a martyr for the Irish nationalist cause, though it was they who alienated him and inadvertently killed him. Though this happened when Joyce was young, Parnell’s death marked a change and divide in the Irish nationalist community.

Bloom’s innermost intimacy is exposed, but at most he seems jealous of Boylan:

Is that Boylan well off? He has money. Why? I noticed he had a good rich smell off his breath dancing. No use humming then. Allude to it. Strange kind of music that last night. The mirror was in shadow. She rubbed her full wagging bub. Peering into it. Lines in her eyes. It wouldn’t pan out somehow. (*Ulysses* II.4.57)

Bloom has been costive, constipated, which reveals a bit more of his character than simply the status of his processed food. He is slow and reluctant to action in

his marriage and his sex life with his wife, Molly. He is stuck with this knowledge that his wife is cheating on him, but he does nothing about it, at least not this day. His obstacle is himself; he is passive and not a man of action.

Matcham's Masterstroke becomes something that he can exert force against and use as a rag: "He tore away half the prize story sharply and wiped himself with it" (*Ulysses* II.4.57). His contempt for Boylan and his frustration with himself and Molly are the clear emotional incendiaries; however, Bloom has reached the end of the excremental life process. He must start over again. He must consume history through life through organs; digest food, history and news, extracting only the valuable, the necessary, to feed the brain and the body; and finally, expel the useless waste and wipe using yesterday's now news.

Joyce gives the reader the option to abandon repugnance, shame, embarrassment, and disgust over excrement, allowing for a certain amount of freedom from social convention, conventional storytelling, and bottled up, costive taboo through unabashed frankness of language and character. He defied convention and fought to keep his work alive and circulating to bring audiences a new now even approximately 100 years after its first publication. There is no other literature quite like Joyce's *Ulysses* that represents excrement candidly while managing to symbolize and comment on Irish and English history and journalism. Rather than hiding "truth behind metaphor and synecdoche," Joyce layers truth, symbolism, Irish nationalism, commentary on journalism, and so forth, and does not sacrifice any one for another, but rather finds a way for symbolism; the now and allusion work together without compromising (Bradshaw and Canniford 103).

NOTES

[1] Peristalsis is the involuntary constriction and relaxation of the muscles of the intestine or another canal, creating wavelike movements that push the contents of the canal forward (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

[2] *Ulysses* is full of Biblical, Catholic, Irish, English, and Jewish references. The entire structure of the book is based on Homer's *Odyssey*: chapters, characters, obstacles, and so forth. .

[3] Constitution is a delicate term for a trip to the bathroom that takes place in the morning.

[4] Titbits are defined as small and delicate pieces of food; a toothsome morsel, delicacy, *bonne bouche*; or—as is the more appropriate definition for this particular section—a brief and isolated interesting item of news or information; hence in *pl.*, name of a periodical consisting of such items (*OED*).

[5] Rag content was the portion of rag used to make a particular paper. The rag end is the last part or remnant of something. The rag house (in the paper making industry) is a building in which rags are stored or prepared (*OED*). Rag is also a slang term for tabloids that are produced daily, bi-weekly, and weekly.

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