

“The Wandering Jew”: The Construct of Jewish Identity Using Literary Techniques in James Joyce’s Ulysses

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ABSTRACT

Modernism saw the liquidation of the individual, but through the character of Leopold Bloom, Joyce tries to raise anew the question of individuality. Joyce calls out the hypocrisy of the so-called ‘faith’ that had turned more demonstrative than personal. Try as one may, Bloom does not fit into any categories, nonetheless, he faces persecution, the focus of vicious anti-Semitism over the course of the day. A single day depicting Dublin's anti-Semitism plays against the larger backdrop of the anti-Semitism that was sweeping Europe in the beginning of the twentieth century. Bloom does not represent a one-dimensional orthodox or even the assimilated Jewishness. The nature of his identity is complex. It reveals the distinctions between Jewishness and non-Jewishness as constructs based on imagination and perception rather than on fixed criteria. Joyce, thereby, plays with and counters common stereotypes about Jewishness. A bird’s eye view of the novel, I believe, reveals that Joyce is less concerned with how Jews as a community survive, through jibes and physical attacks, than how individual men survive. All of this is made vivid through the interior monologue, a variant of stream of consciousness. Exploiting this technique, through his oeuvre, Joyce reinstates the individual—free of all identities.

Keywords: *Anti-Semitism, Bloom, Construct, Interior Monologue, Ireland, Jewishness, Joyce, Other, Outsider, Protestantism, Roman Catholic, Stream of Consciousness*

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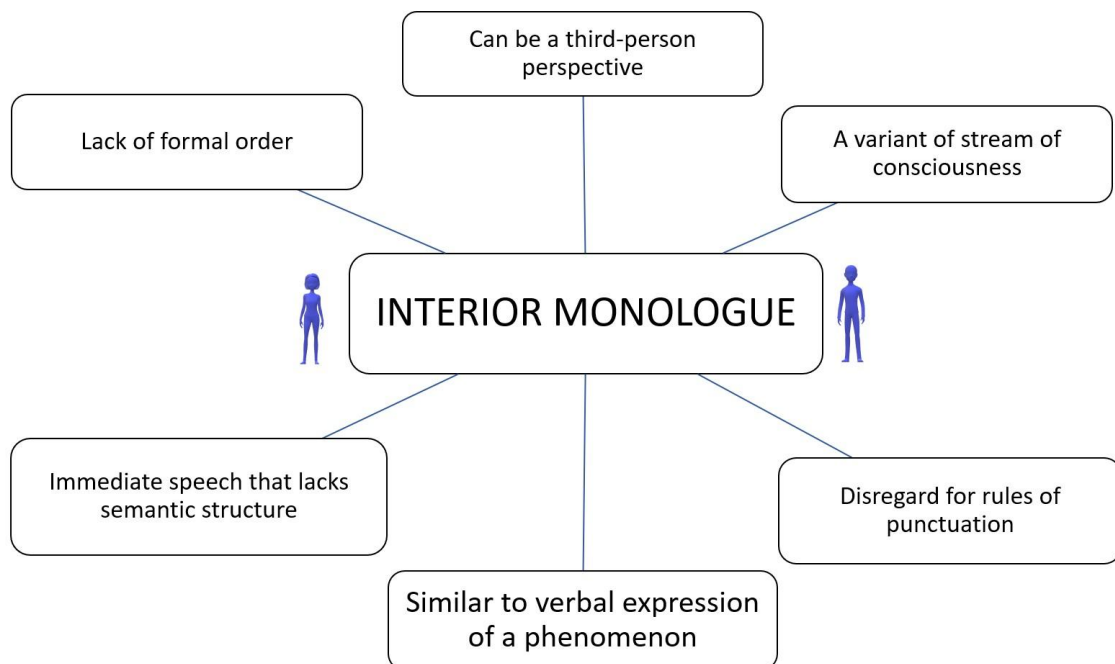
Introduction:

Anti-Semitism is the rumour about the Jews. [1]

This paper through its seven sections, namely— the curious case of Leopold Bloom’s Jewishness, Ireland and the Jews, foreshadowing the Holocaust, contemporary anti-Semitism, “Hath not a Jew eyes?”, the ‘other’, and the promised land shows how James Joyce used the literary techniques of stream of consciousness, interior monologue, as well as self and other to bring out the rampant anti-Semitism that existed in Ireland; a microcosm for the world at large.

The curious case of Leopold Bloom’s Jewishness

In the mooted novel, we see that a stylized way of thinking out loud—the inner monologue is employed. Some call it the ‘interior’ monologue. A variant of the Modernist ‘stream of consciousness’ technique, the difference lies in that an interior monologue can be a third-person perspective (see Fig. below). If stream of consciousness is the character’s point of view, then interior monologue are the same thoughts woven into description using the writer’s own language.



The reason for the lack of order is that consciousness has no beginning or end— thoughts occur quite randomly and jump from one thing to another very often. A major issue of such random rumination (depicted through the interior monologue) by the novel's central character, Leopold Bloom, is his identity. He is viewed as a Jew throughout the novel by others. However, his faith—what he sympathizes with or what he practices, remains a dubious affair, so much so that, a seemingly self-possessed Bloom, 'catechizes' his own Jewishness or the lack of it, and ruminates:

He thought that he *thought* that he was a Jew whereas he knew that he knew that he *knew* that he was not. (*Ulysses* 17.530-31¹) [2]

Being considered a Jew by his acquaintances, could have been either on the ground of heritage or practice. Bloom's father Rudolf Virag (later Rudolf Bloom) was a Jew but had been converted to Protestantism "by the Society for promoting Christianity among the jews" (17.1638-39). However, orthodox Biblical and Judaic belief is that Jewishness is based on the mother's bloodlines. So, Leopold Bloom, whose mother Ellen Higgins, was an Irish Catholic is technically not a Jew, and this, he knows. He tells Stephen, "I . . . told him his God, I mean Christ, was a jew too and all his family like me *though in reality I'm not*" (16.1084-85; italics mine). Bloom had once baptized as a Catholic to marry Molly and twice as a Protestant in childhood. What's more, Protestantism he renounced at an early age, and Catholicism he mocks throughout the novel. Bloom's sarcastic view of the Catholic mass is evident when he says he would "prefer an ounce of opium" to submitting to Catholicism (5.327). Bloom admits the mass would be "more interesting if you understood what it was all about", but he does not understand it and has no desire to (5.423-24). Bloom explicitly rejects Christianity, aligning himself with Christ as a Jew, but refers to the messiah as "Your God" when replying to the jibe made by the Citizen (12.1805). Also, he does not support the Irish revival which was ostensibly Catholic. In fact, most Irish nationalists were also Catholic. Bloom's Irish identity, the sole identity he claims, is inextricably mixed up with Roman Catholicism, even in its criticism and rejection of the dominant tradition. Bloom is an apostate from Judaism and Joyce parallels him as he too is an anti-Catholic Irishman, a heretic in his own right. In fact, through the other protagonist, the younger Joyce, the mature Joyce; the writer— supports the nuances of the Valentine, Arian, Sabellian, and Photius' heresy— and on the other hand made fun of the Nicene Creed. He was born a Catholic Irishman, rejected the Church, and then to called himself the greatest Irish writer of his own era. Although, an Irish at heart, Bloom does not subscribe to the hyper nationalism, that was in vogue back when the fatherland was struggling to end colonial rule, as is evident from his altercation with the Citizen. A baptized Catholic, Bloom does not use it as defense against the anti-Semitic attack on him. Rather, he chooses to defend his fellow Jews against the Citizen. This is quite unlike Bloom, who hitherto, had seemed non-confrontational. With his esoteric temperament, one would expect him to transcend rather than engage in conflict. The question whether Leopold Bloom was Jewish has been widely discussed by scholars but misses the main point. Bloom is the uncircumcised, Catholic son, of a Hungarian Jewish father, who had converted to Protestantism, and an Irish Catholic mother, and is married to an Irish Catholic woman. He neither keeps kosher, openly buying and eating pork, nor observes any other Jewish practice. It is therefore obvious that he is not a practicing Jew. He would not have been considered Jewish by the orthodox Jewish community of his time, and probably even be deemed a heretic. Nevertheless, Bloom is constantly stereotyped as Jewish by his Irish Catholic Dubliners and therefore forced to defend himself as if he were Jewish. What he sees himself as is another dubious matter since he keeps changing his religious stance. Overall, one can be sure that he does not particularly identify himself neither as a Jew nor as a Christian. He does consider himself Irish as he said to Stephen "with dramatic force," that he is "as good an Irishman as that rude person I told you about" (16. 1131-33)

Ireland and the Jews

Don Gifford, in his annotations to *Ulysses* historicizes Ireland's treatment of Jews. He says that in 1904 the Protestant Anglo-Irish minority (10 percent) was economically and politically dominant and profoundly conservative and defensive. The Catholic majority was in a contrasting way equally conservative-puritanical and censorious-and defensive, in ways one does not expect of a 90 percent majority (or do we now). Our protagonist, Bloom may be considered to stand for those Jews who saw themselves as Germans, Austrians, or Dutch rather than as Israelites, but who were nevertheless constantly reminded of their Jewish genes by a racist and antisemitic environment. Leopold Bloom is not presented as an assimilated Jew, that is, as someone who is ethnically Jewish but does not adhere to traditional religious practices. By giving Bloom a Catholic mother and a Jewish father (who converted to Protestantism) Joyce tried to make an ethnic categorization *impossible*. Bloom's conversion to Catholicism and his transgression of kosher laws stands in opposition to a religiously defined Jewish identity. Moreover, he does not want to stay in ghettos with fellow Jews to retain his Jewishness. Renowned Professor of Modernist and Judaic studies, Marilyn Reizbaum rightly emphasizes that Joyce fashioned Bloom as "an unfathomable entity, one whom not only the characters of the novel but also its readers seek to identify. He becomes a cultural and literary hybrid, invalidated and at the same time produced by history" [3]. Joyce too seems to have identified himself with Jews based on "parallel conditions of exile, education and displacement". He "found the division between Jew and Gentile artificial" [3]. The formulation— "Jewgreek is greekjew. Extremes meet"

¹ [format— Chapter Number. Line Number(s)] from Gabler Edition of *Ulysses*.

(15.2097-2098) subverts this way of thinking. For Joyce, no religious, cultural, ethnic, or national boundaries existed between Jews and Christians like himself and his assimilated Jewish friends. All boundaries based on notions of race, heritage, or religious or ethnic affiliation were only ideologically constructed and could easily be dismantled. Nadel's assertion that Joyce shared a literary affinity with Jews, that his Judaism was textual, and that he even adopted rabbinic notions of interpretation seems to overstate the matter. With his Jewish friends Joyce may have shared an interest in texts and their interpretation, but there is no reason to assume that he identified this kind of Jewishness with Bloom. Bloom is not presented as a Jewish intellectual but, rather, as an advertising agent; a practical man who indulges in the sciences. James Joyce seems to have been interested in the Zionist movement, but he did not depict Bloom as a Zionist adherent either. Both Bloom and Stephen Daedalus had only a theoretical knowledge of Hebrew and the Irish language, respectively (17.741-42).

Although we can say that Joyce saw an analogy between the Zionist hope for a Jewish homeland in Palestine and the Irish independence movement. He himself lived in exile, though, and at a certain distance from all such national aspirations. Comparisons between the land of Israel and Ireland and Moses and Parnell seem to have been employed frequently by Irish politicians around the turn of the century. Yet he also took an ironic stance toward Irish and Jewish promoters of nationalism. Dlugacz, the pork butcher, appears as the representative of Zionism who shows Bloom a brochure of "the model farm at Kinnereth on the lakeshore of Tiberias," which might become an "ideal winter sanatorium" [3]. Bloom considers the restoration of a Jewish homeland in Palestine a good idea, but for him Zionism has "nothing doing" (4.154-55):

To purchase waste sandy tracts from Turkish government and plant with eucalyptus trees. Excellent for shade, fuel and construction. Orange groves and immense melon fields north of Jaffa.... Nothing doing. *Still an idea behind it*" (4.191-200; italics mine).

We see that both the Zionist and the antisemitic propaganda, view Jews as homeless outsiders in the Diaspora countries whose citizens they are. The reservations against Zionism also serve to express Joyce's reservations against Irish nationalism: "Just as that very old nation. Ireland cannot be renewed through the rhetoric of religion and nationalism, Bloom's Jewishness, from the beginning, goes beyond these narrow means of comprehending the world". Does Bloom finally reconcile himself with Jewish values? It does not seem that Bloom's and Joyce's conflicting identities lead to a final reconciliation with the Jewish or Irish tradition, respectively. Such a 'happy end' would have been counterproductive for the novel's message. A bewildering maze of prejudice and intolerance was intensified by the infiltration into Dublin of growing continental prejudice against the Jews. It is evident in Cyclops:

But do you know what a nation means? says John Wyse.

-Yes, says Bloom.

-What is it? says John Wyse.

-A nation? says Bloom. A nation is the same people living in the same place.... Or also living in different places.... What is your nation if I may ask? says the citizen.

-Ireland, says Bloom. I was born here. Ireland. (12.1419-31)

And after all, says John Wyse, why can't a Jew love his country like the next fellow?

-Why not? says J. J., when he's quite sure which country it is. (12.1628-30)

Such prejudice, which was far less virulent in 1904 Ireland, than in Germany, France, and Russia, emerges as a major theme in *Ulysses* which first published in 1918, therefore foreshadows attitudes that led to the horrors of the Nazi period, even if their centre was Germany and Italy.

Foreshadowing the Holocaust

Hitler had said that, "The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human" [4]. We know Dublin's anti-Semitism in *Ulysses* plays against the larger backdrop of the anti-Semitism that was sweeping Europe in the beginning of the twentieth century. Exactly twenty-nine years from the first Bloomsday, Adolf Hitler became the chancellor of Germany. The Holocaust began the same year and came to an end when the war in Europe officially ended in 1945.

Although set in 1904², it was during the Great War that Joyce wrote *Ulysses*. He had lived in Italy and Germany and Italy and was well versed with the persecution of the Jews³.

The treatment meted to Jews and ethnic and religious minorities all over the world today shows that whatever the minority does, at best, it will only be tolerated by the majority; never accepted. More than seventy years have passed since the Holocaust, anti-Semitism is still rampant.

Contemporary anti-Semitism

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the terms ‘anti-Semitic’ and ‘anti-Semite’ first appeared in English in 1881. The shift in the 1880s from the term anti-Jewish to the term anti-Semitic shows how sinister this new wave of persecution was to become. The term Jewish means a people with a specifically religious identity, if dispersed among many nations. The idea of religious commitment and belief thus implies the possibility of change and reform, including renewal of faith and new idealism. Semitic (which refers to the ancient Babylonians, Assyrians, and Phoenicians as well as Arabs and Jews) suggests instead a racial identity-complete with the nineteenth-century assumption that each race had biologically innate characteristics that dictated a predetermined racial superiority, mediocrity, or inferiority. The biology of race held that individuals could behave variously, but only in extremely limited ways because racial characteristics (what we would call stereotypes), while they could be controlled or held in check, could never be eradicated. Even to this day anti-Semitic literature is very prosperous in Germany; there scarcely passes a week without another production on the matter— pro or contra— without, however, new results for history. On December 10, 2018, The Telegraph UK reported a survey conducted by the European Union’s Fundamental Rights Agency. It questioned Jews in twelve EU countries, including Britain, France, and Germany. Ninety-five per cent of Jews in France believe antisemitism is a fairly big problem, up from eighty-five per cent when the poll was last run six years ago. Eighty-five per cent of European Jews consider anti-Semitism to be the biggest social or political problem in the country and eighty-nine per cent of Jews think anti-Semitism is most problematic on the internet and social media. The survey of 16,300 Jewish people in Europe found that almost a third avoid attending events or visiting Jewish sites because they do not feel safe and thirty-eight per cent considered emigrating. Twenty-eight per cent of respondents had been harassed at least once in the past year but seventy-nine per cent did not report the harassment.

“Hath not a Jew eyes?” [6]

Bloom’s most emphatic statement of solidarity with the Jewish people occurs in Cyclops— ironically, the episode associated with a giant of the same name. Later, he talks of the incident explaining it to an intoxicated Stephen. It also is his only statement of solidarity. Stephen too tells Private Carr: “Personally, I detest action” (15.4414). We must remember that Leopold Bloom, is after all the modern-day Ulysses, therefore, he expresses distaste for the destructive impulse:

I resent violence and intolerance in any shape or form. It never reaches anything or stops anything (16.1099-101).

Due to this pacifist temperament, frequently in the novel, Bloom allows anti-Semitic comments to slide by him, sometimes, he even makes them himself. Don Gifford’s annotations inform us that the giant refers to the Citizen; the hyper nationalist figure modelled on Michael Cusack. He was founder of the Gaelic Athletic Association (1884), which was dedicated to the revival of Irish sports such as hurling, Gaelic football, and handball. The association was notably contentious, “banning” as un-Irish those who participated in or watched such “English” games as association football (soccer), rugby, field hockey, and polo. Cusack styled himself “Citizen Cusack” and quoted as his standard greeting:

I’m Citizen Cusack from the Parish of Carron in the Barony of Burre in the County of Clare, you Protestant dog! (12.61).

² Though written during 1915-22, being set in 1904, *Ulysses* could have no direct reference to the Great War. But the writing time intrudes on the time written about. Joyce’s avant-garde ingenuity was such that he craftily smuggled into the text his response to war, violence, and history itself, often linking it with the physical force nationalism in Ireland which he detested [5].

³ If one historicizes Joyce, the inventory of history’s violence may include the body’s experience and annihilation in the mechanical warfare of the First World War; firing squads; the imprisonments and executions in the Kilmainham prison; the Nazi concentration camps of Auschwitz, Dachau, and Buchenwald, full of living skeletons and heaps of corpses of Bloom’s co-religionists (Bloom is a Jew converted to Catholicism); and the gas chambers filled with Zyklon B. [5]

Challenged by the virulent anti-Semitism of his fellow Dubliners, Bloom, despite possible physical harm to himself, speaks up for the first time as a Jew, defending his race. The Jewish race since time immemorial has been the 'other'.

The 'other'

The 'Other' is a projection created inside us; everything 'dark' within us which we do not wish to accept. It is the 'they' to 'us'. In *Ulysses*, our two protagonists, Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom share one very important trait: they are both outsiders in Dublin. On the one hand Stephen has rejected the Catholic Church, and on the other, he is against English imperialism, yet he does not embrace Irish nationalism. He refused the pleas of his dying mother and subsequently left his father's house. He is an intellectual and an agnostic and has no real community. Bloom is an outsider to most of Dublin due to his Hungarian heritage and his Jewishness. Stephen's otherness results from his abandonment of every community he used to be a part of whereas Bloom's otherness results from his, ostensibly, belonging to a particular community. The latter's personality too reinforces his otherness. In a community of drunks, he does not drink and surrounded by gamblers, he does not bet. He wants to talk about things but is not very vocal or articulate. He is sensitive to injustice but allows his own oppression. He is a known cuckold who will not leave his wife. He has community neither among his Christian neighbours nor among the Jews of the city. Leopold Bloom lived in the diaspora as did most Jews in 1904. The extent of his Jewishness, although debated by critics continually, is certainly considered by his neighbours to be enough to make him the 'other'. In fact, Bloom's entire worldview makes him very much a Jewish in personality, completely irrelevant is his non-practice of the religion. The Jews were considered more of a race than followers of a religion. Joyce plays on the 'stereotype' of the Jewish astuteness in business. Amidst his sauntering, our flâneur, makes sure to attach value to the practical and to look beyond. Strangers in a strange land; Stephen, and to a greater extent— Bloom, try to figure out through the course of the novel, how to secure and maintain a home. Their home is emotional and psychological, and not necessarily a physical homeland, despite their status as oppressed outsiders. Although, Bloom cannot be put into any clear-cut religious or ethnic bracket, he is constantly stereotyped as "the Jew" by his Irish Catholic contemporaries. Jews were seen as the quintessential 'Others' in Europe. It was from among them that a Prophet was to be born and indeed Jesus was born of Mary, a Jew and his stepfather, Joseph was a Jew too. The Jews refused to accept Jesus as the prophet from god and betrayed and crucified him. When on the cross, Jesus said that they would always wander the Earth and never find a home. Since then Jews are targeted as 'Christ-killer' and 'wanderers of the Earth'. Bloom, when he enters the library is called "The wandering Jew" by Buck Mulligan (9.1209). The persecution and prejudice that they had to face riveted them toward their 'promised land'; the country they had been promised in the Torah as a gift for they were deemed the 'chosen people'.

The Promised Land

Bloom is sometimes identified in the novel with Moses. Scholar, Constantine Theoharis unites Bloom's mythical parallel Odysseus with Moses by explaining that, "both attempt to restore liberated national remnants to their patrimonies, and both meet resistance from dependants in the attempt" [7]. Richard Ellmann points out that Bloom believes "the promise of the promised land has long since been broken" [8]. Our protagonists shall have found a way to free themselves from the emotional and psychological oppression they endure in Dublin; that would be their escape into the promised land. In *Dubliners*, Joyce's short story collection, all major characters wish to escape from Dublin and see their respective 'promised' lands elsewhere. At his home in the end, he is safe, but he must soon venture out again like Stephen.

Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom are both outsiders in Dublin as we had established in the previous section, therefore, each seeks passage to home and 'promised land,' though their definitions of these ambiguous places differ from one another. For Bloom, his home where his wife resides is not definitely the promised land. He ventures out in the morning and takes detours through the city. It seems very unlikely that he wishes to return home. The reason too is quite evident. I posit that for Bloom it is Stephen who is his 'promised land', so to say. He follows Stephen and finds bliss in his company. He narrates to an inebriated Stephen, the happenings of his day. He says—

He called me a Jew and in a heated fashion offensively. So, I without deviating from plain facts in the least told him his God, I mean Christ, was a Jew too and all his family like me though in reality I'm not. (16.1082-85)

It is through these narrations we can fathom how hurt Bloom was by the anti-Semitic attack on him by the Citizen. The accusations he faces as a Jew all resurface when in Stephen's company. He narrates all the thoughts that run in his subconscious and says:

Jews, he softly imparted in an aside in Stephen's ear, are accused of ruining. Not a vestige of truth in it, I can safely say . . . I'm, he resumed with dramatic force, as good an Irishman as that rude person I told you about. (16.1119-20, 1131-33)

Stephen thus becomes Bloom's symbolic promised land.

Conclusion:

It is quite clear that Bloom refuses to let his identity be fixed as Jewish. He does not consider himself Jewish—neither in a religious fashion nor as part of a Jewish nation— whose promised land is Palestine. Bloom is neither Jewish nor Gentile, but somewhere in between. Joyce implicitly through Bloom, thereby, criticizes any notions of racism, as well as calls out ‘otherness’. Implicit in James Joyce’s choice to make the Jewish character of Leopold Bloom the main protagonist of his work *Ulysses* is Joyce’s own outsider status within Irish society at the time when he wrote⁴. In a capsized world, due to an ongoing War, the modern mind is already facing an identity crisis. The view that everyone born in a country be considered that country’s native citizen should be good enough for all and also holds true. Everyone is entitled to enjoy equality is the politically and socially progressive view that has not been adopted by most countries even to this day. I posit that, Joyce endowed Bloom with such a complex identity because he wanted to demonstrate the falsity and futility of stereotyping.

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⁴ He told Frank Budgen, English painter, and close friend, “I want the reader to understand always through suggestion rather than direct statement” [9].