



Bloom's Dismantling of The Gender Performativity in Dublin Through the Looking Glass of Calypso

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Received: 19.09.2025; Accepted: 22.09.2025; Available online: 30.09.2025

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Abstract

James Joyce's "Ulysses" is widely regarded as a literary masterpiece that has inspired thousands of people worldwide. This paper observes how Joyce through his characters, deconstructs the various gender stereotypes by questioning prescriptive masculinity by opening up the fallacy of societal notions. Ulysses aims to challenge outdated assumptions regarding gender and sexuality while also critically examining the societal context they arise. "Calypso", the fourth chapter of Ulysses, introduces us to Leopold Bloom, a 38-year-old Jewish advertising canvasser for a Dublin newspaper. The more feminised and emasculated persona visible in Bloom is in contrast to the masculinity embodied by the epics and Irish men. Thus, Bloom's introduction to readers is through a lens of femininity. Nourishment and Nurturance, the traditional feminine quality is the primary feature we witness in him. Bloom's masculinity departs from the cultural norms, transcending the patriarchal structures and preconceived notions of gender roles and gender relations. His model of masculinity is a contemporary reworking of the knightly notions of chivalry. Through Bloom, Joyce deconstructs the conscious as well as unconscious social attempts to categorise certain physical and mental characteristics as either masculine or feminine. Bloom represents an alternative perspective to masculinity in Ireland in the early 20th century. Thus, through this display and dismantling of the rigid systems, Joyce creates a hero, Leopold Bloom, who departs from the traditional masculine Dublin society and through interaction with Bloom's sexuality, Joyce raises a greater psychological commentary on gender relations. As Bloom interrogates the gender stereotypes in Dublin, this remains relevant even in our times, thus making Ulysses an immortal work.

Keywords: Ulysses, James Joyce, Gender Performativity, Gender Fluidity, Dublin Society

James Joyce's "Ulysses" is widely regarded as a literary masterpiece that has inspired thousands of people worldwide. Through his characters, Joyce deconstructs the various gender stereotypes by questioning prescriptive masculinity by opening up the fallacy of societal notions. *Ulysses* aims to challenge outdated assumptions regarding gender and sexuality, while also critically examining the societal context in which they arise. "Calypso", the fourth chapter of *Ulysses*, introduces us to Leopold Bloom, a 38-year-old Jewish advertising canvasser for a Dublin newspaper. The more feminized and emasculated persona visible in Bloom is in contrast to the masculinity embodied by the epics and Irish men. Thus, Bloom's introduction to readers is through a lens of femininity. Nourishment and Nurturance, the traditional feminine quality, are the primary features

we witness in him. Bloom's masculinity departs from the cultural norms, transcending the patriarchal structures and preconceived notions of gender roles and gender relations. His model of masculinity is a contemporary reworking of the knightly notions of chivalry. Through Leopold Bloom, Joyce challenges the outdated assumptions of gender and sexuality, breaking the binary of biological sex and critically examining the social contexts that give rise to these phenomena. Thus, through this display and dismantling of the rigid systems, Joyce creates a hero, Leopold Bloom, who departs from the traditional masculine Dublin society and through interaction with Bloom's sexuality, Joyce raises a greater psychological commentary on gender relations. As Bloom interrogates the gender stereotypes in Dublin, this remains relevant even in our times, thus making *Ulysses* an immortal work.

James Joyce's "*Ulysses*" is widely regarded as a literary masterpiece that has inspired thousands of people worldwide. Joyce is meticulous in capturing the sound, rhythm and idiosyncrasies of Dublin as he gives us an accurate picture of Dublin, which helps the readers to reconstruct the city by reading through *Ulysses*. It helps to create a caricature of the socio-political and economic conditions of early twentieth-century Ireland. Thus, *Ulysses* is an elaborately schematized work that is both self-reflexive and self-conscious. Joyce is more determined to digress from the traditional sequentially of narrative to profound verse, parody of the sacred literature, and usage of the stream-of-consciousness technique to label it as having acquired a fearsome reputation for difficulty. Joyce's impressive inclusion of a stream-of-consciousness narrative style is revolutionary not only for the 1920s but also for the present. By portraying *Ulysses* in a grand template of the *Odyssey*, Joyce elevates ordinary life into the grandeur of epic.

This modern-day reworking of the *Odyssey* departs from the traditional concepts of gender performativity and meticulously unravels the problematic and rigidly polarized Dublin society. Through his characters, Joyce deconstructs the various gender stereotypes by questioning prescriptive masculinity by opening up the fallacy of societal notions. *Ulysses* aims to challenge outdated assumptions regarding gender and sexuality while also critically examining the societal context they arise.

"Calypso", the fourth chapter of *Ulysses* introduces us to Leopold Bloom, a 38-year-old Jewish advertising canvasser for a Dublin newspaper. He is a Homeric analogue to Odysseus. When Bloom is introduced, he is neither portrayed as one sitting in a pub and consuming alcohol, nor as one talking at length of his male bravado or adventures. The readers get a glimpse of Bloom in a traditionally feminine domestic space, preparing food for his wife, who is not yet awake. He is portrayed as a very kind soul who spends time with his cat even while being preoccupied with household chores. The more feminized and emasculated persona visible in Bloom is in contrast to the masculinity embodied by the epics and Irish men. The way he prepares the breakfast for his wife shows his culinary skills, as he also gives utmost care and affection even while setting the plate. When he needs to go out to buy some pork kidney, he makes sure not to disturb the deep sleep of his wife. He even leaves the house unlatched so as not to disturb her. He is well aware of her food preferences and therefore makes sure not to fill the plate, and to specifically include yesterday's loaves rather than the daily fresh ones. Thus, Bloom's introduction to readers is through a lens of femininity. Nourishment and Nurturance, the traditional feminine quality is the primary feature we witness in him. Bloom's masculinity departs from the cultural norms, transcending the patriarchal structures and preconceived notions

of gender roles and gender relations. His model of masculinity is a contemporary reworking of the knightly notions of chivalry. Many critics consider Bloom to have a balanced brain, the grace of a woman combined with the strength of a man. Through Bloom, Joyce deconstructs the conscious as well as unconscious social attempts to categorize certain physical and mental characteristics as either masculine or feminine.

Bloom represents an alternative perspective to masculinity in Ireland in the early 20th century. Masculinity as a social construct gets deconstructed from the popular understanding of masochism to more sensitive and emotionally available qualities. He exhibits a very pacifying nature and is more at home in his body. This lack of male buster and dominance marginalizes him in Dublin society. While we witnessed more intellectual wanderings of Stephen Dedalus in the previous chapters, in *Calypso*, we see a hero who is busy with household activities and intestinal hankerings. The novel shifts from the gender-segregated perceptions of Stephen to Bloom's all-encompassing worldview. Bloom departs from the conventional epic heroes by meandering around the kitchen, bedroom and the market. Instead of the epic catalogues of the ship or the booty, Joyce gives a catalogue of bodily organs and their preparations. His utmost concern in perfectly setting the breakfast and providing Molly with a luxurious breakfast is an anomaly in patriarchal Dublin society.

He wanders all around the market to get the pork kidney. When his shopping is done in the market, he rushes back home. All his movements circle back to the initial point, the Home. Bloom is a centrifugal hero, home is his center, and all his movements take him back to this little place. When he returns home, there are letters to both Bloom and Molly. The letter to Molly is addressed to Mrs. Marion Bloom instead of Mrs. Leopold Bloom. This gives us a peep into the power dynamics in this house. He is relegated from his position of being the husband. As Gifford points out in his book *Ulysses Annotated: Notes for James Joyce's Ulysses*, simply how this letter addressed helps to prove that it is from a male suitor, writing: "in 1904 [Mrs. Marion Bloom was] an ill-mannered mode of address to a married woman who [was] living with her husband. She should be addressed as 'Mrs. Leopold Bloom'" (Gifford). This letter gives Bloom a feeling of usurpation from the bedroom and his household. When he enters her room, he picks up her dirty clothes and serves her with the breakfast. In his servitude of domestic routines, she executes her bossy orders. Bloom asks "Do you want the blind up?" and begins raising it without waiting for a reply. " – That do? he asked, turning." She orders him on to his next task: " – Hurry up with that tea, she said. I'm parched." (Joyce). In his servitude of the domestic duties, she orders him and only gives a sleepy grunt to his questions.

The letter to Molly depicts the subordinate and relegated position held by Bloom. This address of Mrs. Marion Bloom is a violation of convention. In *The Economy of Ulysses*, Mark Osteen observes that

"Bloom believes that the *nomoi* (rules) of his *oikos* (home) are out of balance. In the etymological sense, the "economy" of his household is disrupted, if not by Molly's power, then by the author of the letter addressed to 'Mrs. Marion [not Leopold] Bloom,' as if Bloom were dead" (Osteen).

This lack of address to Bloom shows that he has no ownership in his own house or over his wife. He registers this insult of lack of control or the lack of acknowledgement as the head of the family, "His quickened heart slowed at once. Bold hand. Mrs. Marion." (Joyce). The address of the letter shows the disrupted domestic economy, as usually the head of the

family is assumed to be a male in the early 20th-century Dublin society. Thus, the letter addressed in the name of Mrs. Marion Bloom points out that Bloom is dead. Society considers Bloom to be inefficient and incapable as a patriarchal figure. Bloom's identity is defined by Molly; he is known as the husband of Molly. He comes up short when considered in light of the late nineteenth-century manliness, where masculinity was equated with sexual and physical prowess rather than humane feelings. His position as subordinate to Molly in the family is more willing and deliberate. He enjoys the domestic routine. He is seen as a misfit in the socially constructed gender roles. The traditionally preconceived notions of masculinity are domination, sexual prowess, competitiveness, being aggressive and courage. But Bloom's activities and his daily routines deviate and conflict with the established gender roles. Preparing food, taking care of the domestic sphere, to expressing compassion and kindness are usually considered the female terrain. Like Stephen, he fails the "two traditionally most important tests of masculinity: physical prowess and sexual conquest" (Sadowski).

Most of Bloom's traits are associated with women; therefore, most critics consider him androgynous. These deviant qualities of Bloom from the established cultural norms could be seen as a harsh critique of Dublin's male domination. When Dublin society is viewed through the lens of traditional masculine stereotypes of physical aggressiveness, sexual prowess and violence, Bloom is seen as an anomaly as he prepares breakfast for his wife, talks to the cat and feeds it, sympathizes with women's hardships and initiates a fund to help poor Dignam's family. In the culturally established gender roles, Bloom's kindness, openness, diplomacy and cognitive reasoning ostracize him to be a figure of contempt.

Bloom seems to have a subordinate relationship with Molly, as their conversations are filled with female demands and male acquiescence. This visible power dynamics is rather different and an anomaly in the masculine Irish society. His sexual passivity and self-abasement situate him on the fringes. Amidst the rigid polarization of gender roles, his manhood is put into question in private and public spheres. In Dublin, males and females were made to occupy two different spheres. While men are allowed to engage in public spheres, political talks and economic transactions, women are relegated to a claustrophobic space with the sole task of nurturing the family, denied to engage in public spheres. In *Calypso*, we see the role reversals, as Bloom occupies the kitchen and Molly the public space. This small scene is quite revolutionary as it helps to have an alternative perspective on male supremacy. Bloom is not seen as unequivocally masculine in a sexually polarized society. He is a balanced and complete man, less conventional than the Homeric prototypes of physical prowess and sexual conquest. While *Odysseus* had a humiliating enslavement by *Calypso*, Bloom, occupying the domestic space, is far from being a domestic slave.

Bloom is both a motherly and fatherly figure. He takes care of Molly and Milly well. He makes sure that Molly is well nourished preparing a healthy breakfast for her without disturbing her deep sleep. It's important to note that Milly writes to her father and not to her mother. The letter addressing "Dearest Papli" shows the depth of their relationship. He is so deeply connected to his daughter and feels proud of his daughter's achievements. He still cherishes the moustache cup that Millie gifted him when she was too small. On her fifteenth birthday, he gifts her with a team. Tam was a symbol of female independence and autonomy in the Victorian era. Therefore, by gifting her with a new tool of freedom, he wishes her to soar to heights. The maternal love and affection that is absent in Molly is

taken over by the paternal figure, Mr. Bloom. This love and affection Bloom gives is very different from other paternal figures visible in *Ulysses*, who are mostly negligent and irresponsible in their duties.

Amidst the culturally established gender roles, Bloom undergoes an internal conflict. Joyce writes of Bloom:

“[H]e disliked those careers of wrongdoing and crime on principle. Yet, though such criminal propensities had never been an inmate of his bosom in any shape or form, he certainly did feel, and no denying (while inwardly remaining what he was), a certain kind of admiration for a man who actually brandished a knife, cold steel, with the courage of his political convictions, though personally, he would never be a party to any such thing...” (Lawrence).

The diplomatic, conscientious, sympathetic hero is an alternative to the more popularly accepted norms of masculinity. His interior struggles of existence in this society question the definitions of masculinity in early twentieth-century Ireland. Due to his feminine presence, he is mostly considered homosexual and sexually repressed. His domestic activities and action of being a nurturer bring along the suspicion of Bloom's masculinity and categories him as androgynous. Even though his passiveness is mocked, he is not a meek personality who avoids taking action. In *Circe* when there occurs a scuffle in the streets, Bloom alerts the police and defends Stephen courageously. But Bloom's courageousness is different from the aggressive-violent-confrontational masculine society.

In the introductory chapters that are led by Stephen Dedalus, we see Bloom in stark contrast with Stephen. While Bloom's thought processes are guided by everyday domestic thoughts, Stephen has a deep philosophical contemplation. Bloom is considerate, and caring and depicts a more effeminate side blurring the lines of masculinity and femininity. He is potentially more feminine than masculine as he meanders around the kitchen and domestic spaces. The one reason stated by Molly likes Bloom is because she “saw he understood or felt what a woman is” (Joyce). Bloom's openness to other's experiences, and being kind and emphatic made him desirable for Molly. While preparing the breakfast he spends some quality time with the cat. He says “—see ourselves as others see us” (Joyce). He even ponders about how the cat sees him and how others perceive him. He is even able to empathize with the animals. His pacifist nature and the ability to perceive himself from another's point of view bring other male characters into question. His kind and tender behavior depicts him as opposed to the conventional masculine protagonists.

When Dignam's son returns from the funeral and passes by a poster of the boxing match, “He stood looking in at the two puckers stripped to their pelts and putting up their props. From the sidemirrors two mourning Masters Dignam gaped silently. Myler Keogh Dublin's pet lamb, will meet sergeant-major Bennett, the Portobello bruiser, for a purse of fifty sovereigns, God that'd be a good packing match to see” (Joyce).

In *Dignam's Son*, we see a different version of masculinity blooming. The aggressive athlete vibes, the young man's attraction to physical attacks and pains. The Dublin men are masculine due to the age-old social conditioning. In *Cyclops*, when Bloom is in a pub he is mocked at as he abstains from having drinks, and not being interested in talks of sports and physical activities. Here we witness a conflict between the cerebral Bloom and parochial Dublin society. His ability to raise his voice later in an argument depicts his strength, especially mental strength, which he never gets credit for. Bloom is comfortable

at his home, in his little domestic space, but when he ventures out, he feels insecure due to Dublin's put-on machismo. Amidst the rough, parochial and domineering Dubliners he becomes an outcast due to his Jewish identity and also of his intermediate gender.

Leopold Bloom defies the traditions of epics and romance. He is not ascribed to great physique, bravery, vengefulness or brute force. More than the physical prowess his mental prowess is heightened and appreciated as being a more thinking and caring man. In contrast to the epic heroes who fight battles and invade places, Bloom wears the robe of a caretaker to the people around him. He prepares food for Molly, sends birthday gifts for Milly, and gives accommodation facilities to Stephen at night. By defying the epic tradition, he tries to violate the popular preconception of gender categorization. Joyce endows Bloom with Odysseus's more unconventional characteristics. The bloody slaughter, cunningness, deception, ruthless confrontations, merciless killings, and male bravado which define the Odysseus are lacking in Bloom. By the deconstruction of some gender stereotypes, Joyce produces characters that deviate from the mainstream notions of masculinity. Even Stephen counters the masculine expectations, as he is fearful of dogs, thunderstorms, and drowning. Bloom in his epistemological relationship uses the penname as Henry Flower, even this name brings his masculinity into question by emphasizing femininity.

From our preconceived notions of epic heroes in various cultures, they are only confined to physical prowess and bloody slaughter. Here the reader's expectations and reality get clashed. The ideal female heroines were thought to be submissive, meek, fragile, and mere commodities of the patriarchy. As Joyce suggests in *Finnegans Wake* by rendering "beauty" as "booty", women were merely considered as an inspirational icon, an object of the male gaze. But Molly Bloom departs from this gender stereotype by exercising sexual prowess, instead of becoming a mere booty. She has the autonomy to choose her partner and is financially independent through her talents. In their marital relationship, Molly holds more power and thus can be seen as a matriarchal dominating figure, which is traditionally seen as masculine.

Odysseus was kept in forceful enslavement by Calypso. Whereas Bloom is a willing captive in the domestic sphere. He cherishes his time spent in the kitchen doing domestic activities. Bloom is bound to his wife by her amorous captivity. Rather than exhibiting sexual prowess, he prefers sexual submissiveness. In the rigidly polarized society men are assigned with power, force, and sexual prowess whereas women are associated with submissiveness, passivity and receptiveness. This various categorization of characteristics is inverted by Bloom. He projects empathy, a female trait, and sympathizes with a woman in the hospital. There occurs a breach between the conventional assumption of manliness, and the submissive, motherly emphatic Bloom. This leads to social ostracism as mainstream society gets threatened by the deviant masculinity portrayed in Bloom.

Even though he is well aware of the illicit relationship with Molly he keeps silent. He deliberately avoids the house the whole day, because he is conscious of the arrival of Blaze Boylan. Even when he witnesses a letter from Boylan, he stays calm not losing his temper. Bloom's marriage and the intrusion of Boylan into this marital relationship is well-known news in society. His inability to confront Boylan is mostly considered due to his inability to sexually satisfy Molly. Boylan represents the figure of masculinity and sexual potency that Bloom lacks. The marital relationship between Molly and Bloom is complicated and intrinsic, but they end up balancing each other. 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. Even though he is upset by the adultery of his wife, he responds rather than react. Bloom reconciles with Molly by attempting to feel what she has felt. Bloom cycles through “envy, jealousy, abnegation, equanimity” as he reflects on his wife’s adultery, rationalizing that of all sins and crimes adultery is one of the least “calamitous”. Instead of acting as a hot-tempered husband creating havoc, solicitude is his response to Molly’s exploitation and betrayal. His refusal to detach himself from Molly differentiates him from the whole other section of Dublin males. Bloom displays utmost respect for Molly's social independence and her artistic accomplishments. Bloom and Molly rather than being the Homeric parallels to Odysseus and Penelope becomes a modern alternative. Both the characters struggle with the culture's view of what constitutes masculinity and femininity.

On the subject of gender relations, then, *Ulysses* ultimately explores and presents a case on how intimate interactions between genders can potentially not only help men and women transcend gender conventions and preconceived notions of separation and antagonism between the sexes but can also enable greater depth and scope of perception, both as empathetic human beings and as artists. James Joyce’s Leopold Bloom redefines the strict code of masculinity and the conventional epic codes. Bloom gives us an alternative retelling of gender ideas and notions in Dublin’s sexually bifurcated, rigidly polarized society. He departs from the hypermasculinity depicted in epics to deconstruct the deep-rooted notions and the categorical division of gender. Characterized by Joyce as the new womanly man, Bloom projects the silent social conditionings prevalent in society. He deconstructs the unconscious social attempt to categorize gender. This radical depiction of Leopold Bloom helps to have a self-reflection on gender in the early 21st century and in the present scenario too. He subverts the heteronormative reality by being a misfit in the binary-based gender identities. The depiction of Leopold Bloom’s gender, however, is noteworthy for Joyce’s acknowledgement that these feminine characteristics can reside both comfortably and uncomfortably in a man who, in all other aspects, is quite exceptionally normal. Throughout the text, Bloom expresses anxiety about his performance of masculinity, due to the socially constructed notion of gender and gender essentialism present in the era. Through Leopold Bloom, Joyce challenges the outdated assumptions of gender and sexuality, breaking the binary of biological sex and critically examining the social contexts that give rise to these phenomena. Thus, through this display and dismantling of the rigid systems, Joyce creates a hero, Leopold Bloom who departs from the traditional masculine Dublin society and by interaction with Bloom’s sexuality, Joyce raises a greater psychological commentary on gender relations. As Bloom interrogates the gender stereotypes in Dublin, this stays relevant even in our times, thus making *Ulysses* an immortal work.

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