FAMILY MEDICAL HISTORY AS INSPIRATION FOR A MASTERPIECE: JAMES JOYCE'S *ULYSSES*

Sonja Đurić

Language Centre,
University of Valencia, Spain

GENTEXT Research Group,
University of Valencia, Spain

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Summary

The paper briefly recaps some of the most obvious examples of insanity, phobias, mental illnesses and other out of the ordinary mental states from James Joyce's *Ulysses* with the intention of showing the results of a literary text analysed through a medical prism. The medical history of the Joyce family is exposed in this paper with the intention of drawing parallels between reality and fiction, proving that the reality may have given inspiration for fiction. Joyce depicts a single day, 16 June 1904, in Dublin throughout 18 chapters and 732 pages. The list of diseases, phobias, mental states, addictions and other bodily troubles and misfortunes is infinite in *Ulysses*. The main characters Molly Bloom, Mr. Bloom, Stephen Dedalus and Gerty MacDowell as well as many others suffer from a series of medical issues. Many Joyceans suggest that Joyce found inspiration for the topics he explored in his personal life as his family members battled with phobias, sexual deviations,

mental instability, anxiety, delirium and alcoholism. James Joyce, Nora Barnacle, Lucia and Giorgio as well as their parents, grandparents, friends, relatives and partners gave inspiration for the sexual deviations, mental instabilities, phobias and anxieties of Molly Bloom, Mr. Bloom, Stephen Dedalus and Gerty MacDowell among many other characters.

Key words:

James Joyce, Ulysses, medicine, mental instability, sexual deviations

INTRODUCTION

Literature and medicine, as it appears, often cross each other's paths. Although it seems that literature has been concerned with medicine far longer than medicine has been with literature. Nowadays in teaching medicine many resort to literature in search of vivid examples of patients and diseases and multilayered historical and social contexts ^[1].

Writers such as Cervantes (in *Don Quixote*), Shakespeare (in *King Lear*), Faulkner (in *The Sound and the Fury*) and Virginia Woolf (in *Mrs Dalloway*), as many others before and after them, all employed mental illnesses in their literary works with the intention of realistically portraying their characters. However, James Joyce and his *Ulysses* might be best known for episodes of insanity and rich description of human experiences^[1]. Joyce ventured not only into the field of psychiatry but also interwove several other branches of medicine into his masterpiece, thereby creating a medico-literary encyclopaedia of a kind ^[2]. His characters experience all bodily functions and needs, battle all types of insanity and diseases, discuss pains and remedies and visit the hospital on their path from conception over birth, life and death through metempsychosis. What is fascinating about *Ulysses* is the fact that Joyce exposed his own family's medical history in the novel.

Even though *Ulysses* is abundant with all kinds of medical topics and Joyce found inspiration both within and outside his family, this paper mainly concentrates on the depictions of mental instability inspired by the Joyce family. The paper briefly recaps some of the most obvious examples of insanity, phobias, mental illnesses and other out of the ordinary mental states from *Ulysses* with the intention of showing the results of a literary text analysed through a medical prism.

PERSONAL BACKGROUND AND LITERARY PARALLELS

James Augustine Aloysius Joyce was born on 2 February, 1882 in Dublin, Ireland. He was the first of ten surviving children of John Stanislaus Joyce and Mary Murray. On 16 June, 1904, Joyce had his first date with Nora Barnacle (1884–1951) who immediately became his lifelong companion. The couple had two children, Giorgio (1905–1976) and Lucia (1907–1982). James Joyce died in Zurich in 1941 of a perforated ulcer.

In order to understand the connection between literature and medicine in Joyce's novels it is important to mention that he studied medicine in Dublin and Paris before he tried his luck as a writer. Nevertheless, according to Lyons, Joyce's medical knowledge came from his acquaintance with a group of med-

ical students, rather than from his own studies as they were brief^[2]. Some of Joyce's medical knowledge was perhaps sparked by his father who gave a try at studying medicine in Cork, but quickly dropped out^[2].

Joyce depicts a single day, 16 June 1904, in Dublin throughout 18 chapters and 732 pages. The list of diseases, phobias, mental states, addictions and other bodily troubles and misfortunes is infinite in *Ulysses*. For example, Gerty MacDowell is lame; Stephen Dedalus is haunted by ghosts, hallucinates and drinks heavily; Mr Bloom appears to be impotent, masochist, might have syphilis, also hallucinates and we know all about his bowel movements; Molly Bloom battles a number of anxieties in connection to her physical appearance and intelligence and is sexually promiscuous. In order to help his friends, Carlo Linati (1878–1949) and Stuart Gilbert (1883–1969), understand his novel, Joyce went as far as to draw two schemes in which he depicts the connections between human organs and the chapters in *Ulysses*^[3]. The schemes are abundant with explanations and indications which disease and which organ are central for each chapter.

Many Joyceans suggest that Joyce found inspiration for the topics he explored in his personal life^[4, 5, 6]. Namely, his mother died in a cancer induced delirium, picking butterflies of the bed, while his father was an alcoholic^[7]. He

himself suffered from conjunctivitis and other eye illnesses which led to almost complete blindness towards the end. Moreover, he wore an eye patch and was short-sighted^[8]. Many argue that he had syphilis, gonorrhoea and/or other venereal diseases and that both he and Nora were treated with mercury and arsenic, known remedies of the time for syphilis and gonorrhoea^[9, 10, 11]. Joyce even believed that his own sexual promiscuity and acquired venereal diseases had contributed to the mental instability and overall illness of his children^[9].

In his letters to Nora, Joyce exhibits masochist and voyeuristic desires as well as a thing or two for coprophilia, dirty talk and fetishism altogether^[5, 6]. Throughout the texts of the letters Joyce does not withhold any of his sexual fantasies and nothing is left unsaid or repressed. In addition, Joyce, much like his father and son was in the habit of heavy drinking. Once *Ulysses* was published and the psychotic, hallucinations of the “Circe” chapter, along with all the other phobias and deviations saw the daylight, Joyce’s mental state was given another look and he was considered both genius and mad^[1, 7]. Carl Jung was one of those who believed Joyce was mad, especially after having read *Ulysses* and having treated Lucia^[7].

According to Kaplan, the Joyce family did not have a history of psychiatric illnesses. However, Joyce’s paternal grandmother, Ellen O’Connell, was “un-

usually sensitive, delicate and anxious about her health”^[7]. Joyce, too, was anxious, sensitive and fanatically superstitious, socially phobic and a hypochondriac^[7, 12]. The inspiration for phobias Joyce probably found in his fear of dogs, thunder, lighting and water (cynophobia and keraunophobia)^[7]. Allegedly, he was attacked by a neighborhood dog when he was young and a religious aunt told him that thunder was God’s anger^[13]. According to LeBlanc, agoraphobia is present in Joyce’s *Dubliners* in the story “Eveline”^[14]. Nevertheless, it also appears that Mr. Bloom may suffer from agoraphobia in the “Circe” chapter of *Ulysses*. At first, Mr. Bloom expresses a high level of discomfort and is embarrassed, fearing that he might be seen and recognised in the brothel. Although he wants to escape the sinister place at the beginning, expressing even signs of agoraphobia, he gradually becomes more and more relaxed and in the end enjoys.

It may be argued that the character of Molly Bloom was shaped to resemble Nora^[15]. Evidence for such claims can be found in the letters Joyce and Nora exchanged^[5, 6]. Unfortunately, some of Nora’s letters seem to be lost. Thus what can be found in Nora’s answers is not as open-minded as Molly Bloom’s thoughts and her sexual appetite is not as copious as Molly Bloom’s, although it certainly is sexual. When Nora was asked about the resemblance all she said was that she was much slimmer than Molly^[16]. It should

be noted that Nora ran away with Joyce in 1904. The couple moved to the continent and lived for over thirty years out of wedlock. Therefore, Nora was not a typical Irish Catholic girl.

Joyce's daughter Lucia was found mentally ill and in the 30s she was permanently hospitalized. Lucia was described as violent, aggressive; she liked setting things on fire and was even briefly and unsuccessfully treated by Carl Jung, who was her twentieth doctor^[4, 7, 17]. Additionally, Lucia appears to have had quite an adventurous and promiscuous sexual youth which may have resulted in two abortuses. Samuel Beckett and Alexander Calder were among her lovers^[7, 17]. Most diagnosed that Lucia has suffered from hebephrenic schizophrenia^[7], although other interpretations of her mental instability were given. Joyce refused to come to terms with Lucia's bleak diagnosis and was convinced that she possessed a fire inside herself. What Joyce saw in his daughter was talent, creativity and passion^[17]. Even though many considered Joyce to be schizophrenic or psychotic – Carl Jung being one of them – it appears that Lucia inherited her mental illness from her mother's side of the family as several relatives were treated for serious mental illnesses^[7].

Sadly, Joyce's worries did not end with Lucia. Namely, his daughter-in-law (Giorgio's wife) had a nervous breakdown, was found manic depressive and

was also hospitalised^[7], while Giorgio himself battled with alcoholism^[4, 17]. As it appears the talented and artistic Joyce children lived in the shadows of their much famous father, depressed, misunderstood and prone to mental instability^[7]. However, their misfortunes seem to have provided the bedrock for the foundation of *Ulysses*.

In *Ulysses*, its main characters are troubled by numerous diseases and body issues. According to George, "*Ulysses* presents non-reproductive sexual acts" most of which are especially familiar to Mr. Bloom and Molly Bloom^[18]. Mr. Bloom, as we find out in the "Circe" chapter, could be suffering from epilepsy, inherited from his grandfather Virag. Virag committed suicide, which suggests that he had depression at least, if not other mental illnesses. In addition, Mr. Bloom has voyeuristic tendencies, which we find out from the "Nausicaa" chapter in which he watches young Gerty MacDowell and pleases himself. From his letters to Marta Clifford and his experience in the brothel we find out that he is a masochist too. Molly Bloom tells us that her husband is impotent, into fetishes, onanism, cunnilingus, fellatio, pornography and coprophilia. Throughout the "Penelope" chapter, Molly Bloom recalls all the sexually deviant intercourses she and her husband indulged in. In the brothel scenes of "Circe", Mr. Bloom's nympholepsy, transvestism, homosexuality, androgy-

ny, bisexuality, cuckoldry and connivance in cuckoldry all become apparent. Furthermore, Mr. Bloom hallucinates and shows signs of psychosis.

Gerty, appears to be narcissistic, and obsessively compulsive when it comes to her looks and underwear. Additionally, Gerty puts on an exhibitionist performance for Mr. Bloom. Molly Bloom, herself also prefers some unconventional sexual intercourses. She does not oppose to doing whatever her loves ask of her, she even has an idea or two of her own and appears rather keen on having sexual intercourse in public places. She seems melancholic, hypochondriac and has several body issues. She resorts to remedies and tricks to lose weight and enhance her breasts.

Stephen Dedalus is haunted by ghosts and guilt. He hallucinates and drinks heavily. In addition, he too is melancholic and depressed. He is often acquainted by prostitutes and evidently suffers from venereal diseases. Stephen Dedalus is portrayed as James Joyce's alter ego and hence mirrors many of Joyce's characteristics, one of which could be social phobia.

CONCLUSION

Certain parallels between the medical history of the Joyce family and the health issues of the characters from *Ulysses* are drawn throughout this paper. Joyce found inspiration in

everything that surrounded him from art, literature, music, history, politics and mythology to medicine. However, it appears that his own health and the health of his closest family members allowed him to portray deeply troubled characters in *Ulysses*. James Joyce, Nora Barnacle, Lucia and Giorgio as well as their parents, grandparents, friends, relatives and partners gave inspiration for the sexual deviations, mental instabilities, phobias and anxieties of Molly Bloom, Mr. Bloom, Stephen Dedalus and Gerty MacDowell among many other characters.

PORODIČNA ANAMNEZA KAO INSPIRACIJA ZA REMEK DELO: ULIKS DŽEJMSA DŽOJSA

Sonja Đurić

Centar za jezike,
Univerzitet u Valensiji, Španija
GENTEXT istraživačka grupa,
Univerzitet u Valensiji, Španija

UDK: 616.895-02-036:616.895.8

Kratak sadržaj

U ovom radu se ukratko pominu neki od najistaknutijih primera ludila, fobija, mentalnih bolesti i drugih neobičnih mentalnih stanja iz Uliksa Džejmsa Džojisa sa namerom da se prikažu rezultati književnog teksta analiziranog kroz medicinsku prizmu. Istorija bolesti porodice Džojis izložena je u ovom radu sa namerom da se povuku paralele između realnosti i fikcije, dokazujući da je stvarnost mogla da da inspiraciju za fikciju. Džojis opisuje jedan dan, 16. juna 1904. godine u Dublinu kroz 18 poglavlja i na 732 strane. Lista bolesti, fobija, mentalnih stanja, zavisnosti i

drugih telesnih problema i nesreća je beskonačna u Uliksu. Glavni likovi Moli Blum, gospodin Blum, Stefan Dedalus i Gerti MekDovel, kao i mnogi drugi pate od niza medicinskih problema. Mnogi Džojsovcu sugerisu da je Džojis pronalazio inspiraciju za teme koje je istraživao u svom ličnom životu, jer su se njegovi članovi porodice borili protiv fobija, seksualnih devijacija, mentalne nestabilnosti, anksioznosti, delirijuma i alkoholizma. Džejms Džojis, Nora Barnackl, Lusija i Džordžio, kao i njihovi roditelji, prijatelji, rođaci i partneri dali su inspiraciju za seksualne devijacije, mentalne nestabilnosti, fobije i anksioznosti Moli Blum, g. Bluma, Stefana Dedalusa i Gerti MakDovel među mnogim drugim likovima.

Ključne reči:

Džejms Džojis, Ulik, medicina, mentalna nestabilnost, seksualne devijacije

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Sonja Đurić

Calle Salvador Rodriguez
Bronchu 1 K pta 15
46025, Valencia, Spain

Tel.fax.mob: + 34 67 235 9868
dj_sonjica@yahoo.com