

“No Rose Blooms Without its Thorns: Pinpointing Masochism in Joyce’s *Ulysses*”

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Molly and Leopold Bloom's relationship in *Ulysses* is so symbolically multifaceted that it is difficult to make sense of from a direct approach. Approaching thematic monstrosities head on—especially those which appear in Joyce's characteristically complex text *Ulysses*—is nearly impossible. Often, it is more rewarding and approachable to use a minor motif to unwind a significantly larger theme. The recurring motif of pins, for example, offers a more manageable avenue to explore the thorny complexities of Molly and Bloom's relationship.

Pins notably surface when Bloom thinks about his two lovers, Molly and Martha. Bloom's thought process draws attention to the contrast between Molly's abundance of pins—both literal and metaphorical—and Martha's lack thereof. At first glance, it may seem Joyce uses pins to reflect an obvious symbolism—that Martha is more desired for her lack of pins compared to Molly. This straightforward concept, however, becomes complicated when one considers Bloom's masochistic identity, and the unfortunate reality that Joyce rarely crafts straightforward significance to his symbols. Bloom's association with masochistic desire in *Ulysses* has been well-rehearsed by Joyce scholars,<sup>1</sup> and suggests something unconventional about Bloom's desire for pins. Indeed, Joyce turns the motif of the pin on its head. "Pins" are not unwanted by Bloom, but rather, subconsciously sought out by him, as a necessary part of his conceptualization of a perfect relationship, attributed to his identity as a masochist.

Perhaps the most memorable and explicit scene in *Ulysses* wherein this pin motif surfaces is in "Lotus Eaters," when Joyce merges pins with thorns. Bloom receives a love letter from his mistress Martha, and finds a flower affixed to the note with a pin. He removes the pin from the letter and discards it, symbolically de-thorning his mistress' rose: "Fingering still the letter in his

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<sup>1</sup> For further reading and discussion of Bloom's masochistic identity, see Carol Siegel's "'Venus Metempsychosis' and Venus in Furs: Masochism and Fertility in Ulysses," Frances L. Restuccia's "Molly in Furs: Deleuzean/Masochian Masochism in the Writing of James Joyce," and James Davies's "Beyond Masochistic Ritual in Joyce and Deleuze: Reading Molly as Non-Corporeal Body."

pocket he drew the pin out of it. Common pin, eh? He threw it on the road. Out of her clothes somewhere: pinned together. Queer the number of pins they always have. No roses without thorns” (Joyce 75). Harry Blamires, compiler of *The New Bloomsday Book*, also interprets this action as Bloom’s desire to “have the rose without the thorn,” (32), or have a romantic relationship without its injuries. Blamires elaborates, “[h]e is not going to prick himself in this relationship. He will have the rose without the thorn. There are too many pins among a woman’s underclothes. It is safer to love at a distance” (32). Blamires’s observation is entirely sound, it simply lacks full consideration of the more subtle implications of this scene and fails to accommodate Bloom’s masochistic identity.

It is easy to interpret this scene in “Lotus Eaters” as evidence that Bloom wants a rose without its thorns, or a relationship without any pain and suffering. However, if the rose is a symbol of a perfect relationship, as is evoked in the cliché he references, then Bloom’s de-thorning of this rose, by his own definition, renders the relationship flawed. His observation, “No roses without thorns” (Joyce 75) therefore transforms his relationship with Martha, which he has just dethorned, as no longer perfect. It is no longer a “rose,” because it no longer has its “thorns,” and by Bloom’s definition, the two cannot exist without each other. He not only discards Martha’s pin, but shreds her letter altogether, and never chooses to rendezvous with her or act on this potential love affair. Instead, for the entire novel, Bloom desperately attempts to rehash romance with his cheating wife, because to Bloom, a perfect relationship cannot exist without its pricks, pins, and physical pains—which is conveniently in line with Bloom’s own masochistic desires.

Conveniently, Joyce fulfills Bloom's masochistic desire elsewhere. Bloom finds the "thorns" of the rose in his relationship with his wife Molly, who unlike Martha, Joyce characterizes with an abundance of pins—both literal and metaphorical. In "Lestrygonians," Bloom observes a scrape on his arm, inflicted by Molly's haphazardly placed pins: "Stick them all over the place. Needles in window curtains. He bared slightly his left forearm. Scrape: nearly gone" (Joyce 160). Unlike Martha's carefully removed pin, Molly's are scattered, poised to randomly inflict pain on an unknowing, but willing Bloom. While he seems to express frustration with this situation, his masochistic tendencies would suggest otherwise. Indeed, he discarded Martha's pin, and instead seeks out Molly's.

Concrete evidence of Bloom's preference to masochistic desires override his fantasy to have a painless relationship. For example, when Bloom examines his pin-inflicted wound in "Lestrygonians," he briefly considers, but then refuses, to buy Molly a pincushion: "Pincushions. I'm a long time threatening to buy one. Stick them all over the place...Not today anyhow" (Joyce 160). Bloom's refusal to buy Molly a pincushion, a device to contain all of her haphazard "thorns," reflects once again his masochistic cravings for the pricks of her pins. Like his brief and unexecuted affair with Martha, Bloom's idea to buy a pincushion for Molly disintegrates almost immediately. A thornless rose is once again, a fleeting fantasy, and a fantasy that a masochist would never dream of.

Joyce explicitly links this relationship between Bloom's masochistic sexuality and Molly's pins in "Calypso." Molly is the sadistic provider to Bloom's masochistic needs. She cheats on Bloom, fails to hide the affair, denies him sex, and is generally emotionally withdrawn throughout the course of the novel. In "Calypso," Bloom even watches Molly skim her racy novel, which Blamires describes as a "a cheap erotic novel with sadistic flavour" (26), with a

pin: “She swallowed a draught of tea from her cup held by nohandle and... began to search the text with the hairpin till she headed the word” (Joyce 62). Molly uses a sadistic reading tool to navigate a sadistic novel.

To amplify this connection, Molly’s erotica is written by “Paul de Kock,” which Blamires points out is phonetically akin to “Poldy Cock,” Bloom’s emasculating nickname (26). In this scene, Bloom observes Molly sadistically continue to deny him sex, and seek instead her pleasure in an erotic novel written by his emasculated authorial double. To deepen Bloom’s figurative torture and humiliation, Molly drags her pin across the text, simultaneously dragging her pin across the author, “Poldy Cock,” as well. Bloom’s masochism is conveniently fulfilled and embodied in his sadistic wife.

Pins resurface elsewhere again in “Lotus Eaters,” wherein pins and the nails of Jesus’ crucifixion are melded. Bloom observes a Catholic mass and observes:

He saw the priest stow the communion cup away, well in, and kneel an instant before it, showing a large grey boot sole from under the lace affair he had on. Suppose he lost the pin of his. He wouldn’t know what to do. Bald spot behind. Letters on his back I. N. R. I.? No: I. H. S. Molly told me one time I asked her. I have sinned: or no: I have suffered, it is. And the other one? Iron nails ran in (Joyce 78).

This fusion of religion, Molly, and nails and pins is complex but nonetheless offers plenty of insight into Bloom’s identity. Blamires observes these unified motifs, describing this scene as “[I]inked references to pins in clothes, thorns in roses, and the nails of the Cross [which] begin to form a thematic thread of imagery relative to the minor and major pricks and pains of life” (32).

Joyce characterizes Bloom not only as a masochist, but also so often as a Christ figure,<sup>2</sup> and in this scene, these two characterizations merge seamlessly.

If Bloom can be a substitute for Christ on the cross, then Molly's pins are the nails that crucify him. The nails which literally crucify Jesus are as essential to his identity as are the pins which metaphorically crucify Bloom, since Christ would not be "Christ" without his crucifixion—and the nails which held him there. If Bloom is a Christ figure in addition to being a masochist, then Molly's pins are just as essential to Bloom's identity. This brief scene once again reflects Joyce's convoluted characterization of Bloom's necessity and desire for Molly's pins.

Pins appear elsewhere in "Lestrygonians," and in this instance, are much more explicitly associated with Bloom's happiness—though still possess masochistic undertones. As Bloom recalls fond memories of his marriage, a particular image comes to mind: "Swish and soft flop her stays made on the bed. Always warm from her. Always liked to let herself out. Sitting there after till near two, taking out her hairpins. Milly tucked up in beddyhouse. Happy. Happy. That was the night..." (Joyce 149). This is the first explicit instance of Molly's pins being associated with Bloom's happiness.

Ironically, according to Blamires, as Bloom continues to recall other delightful memories, these "touching, nostalgic memories here of Molly the young wife...in the kitchen and in the bedroom, [are] entangled with his recollections of the men who admired her too intimately" (63). It is unsurprising that an ironic undertone runs through this seemingly positive image of Molly's hairpins. Once again, Bloom masochistically summons the sting of Molly's pins—in this instance, the sting of her past suitors interwoven in his happy and most intimate memories of her.

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<sup>2</sup> This connection is also often discussed in Joyce scholarship, and critics often point to "Cyclops," wherein Bloom explicitly links himself to Christ.

Bloom cannot conceive of happiness with Molly without simultaneously inflicting on himself an underlying pain.

As expected of his authorial legacy, James Joyce seems to relish in inverting motifs in *Ulysses*. So often, mistresses are conceptualized as the coveted yet dangerously thorned roses, while wives remain the safe, boring, and thornless rose. Instead, Joyce crafts a mistress who can be easily removed of her pricks and pains, but unfortunately, for a masochist character who craves the thorn's sting. Despite the pains of Molly and Bloom's marriage, the novel ends with Molly's stream-of-consciousness, almost orgasmic monologue and acceptance of her husband. In spite of their growing pains, both eventually find sexual fulfillment in the other. Leopold Bloom needs pain to find beauty and fulfillment in a relationship, for he knows that a rose is not a rose without its thorns, and a perfect relationship cannot be perfect if it is pruned of its pains.

## Works Cited

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Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. Edited by Jeri Johnson, Oxford University Press Inc., 1993.

The Project Gutenberg eBook of Ulysses, by James Joyce. This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org). Title: Ulysses. Author: James Joyce. Release Date: August 1, 2008 [EBook #4300] Last Updated: December 27, 2019. Stephen laid the shavingbowl on the locker. A tall figure rose from the hammock where it had been sitting, went to the doorway and pulled open the inner doors. "Have you the key?" a voice asked. "Dedalus has it, Buck Mulligan said. Janey Mack, m choked! He howled, without looking up from the fire: "Kinch! "It" in the lock, Stephen said, coming forward. Both Joyce and Pater maintained that in this dissolving time the purpose of life must be to retain for an instant as intense an impression as possible, and that the purpose of art must be to seize that instant and to represent it as it is. The instant that Pater intended to fix forever is both unique and universal, a resume of the history of the human soul; as such, it illuminates Stephen's aesthetic theory. The world Joyce reveals is neither beautiful nor exalting; in *Dubliners*, which is the main focal point of this essay, it is weak and invalid, stricken by aphasia. Joyce's epiphany, even though it retains the quality of a spiritual revelation, expresses a realistic intention that the young artist had learnt from Flaubert and Ibsen. Joyce's *Ulysses*, on the contrary, has no genuine plot. It describes an ordinary day in Dublin (June 16, 1904: the day on which Joyce met his wife Nora) from within the minds of three fundamental characters. them not long ago I love flowers I'd love to have the whole place swimming in roses God of heaven. theres nothing like nature the wild mountains then the sea and the waves rushing then the beautiful. country with the fields of oats and wheat and all kinds of things and all the fine cattle going about. The example above shows that Joyce conducts more radical tests in *Ulysses* with the form of an interior monologue, particularly in his representation of Leopold Bloom's ideas. He avoids complete phrases with finite verbs in favor of incomplete, often verbless syntagms that mimic the. Get notified when *No Rose is Without its Thorns* is updated. Sign up with Facebook. Sign up with Google.