

# *Ulysses and “A Painful Case”?*

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**Abstract:** *This paper deals with the possibility that the story A Painful Case may present deep thematic and structural connections with Joyce’s later work, and with his entire oeuvre. Beyond the fact that one or more of its characters reappear in Ulysses, these themes and connections, sometimes represented by a name, an idea or a tune can contribute to a pervasive reading of Joyce’s work.*

**Keywords:** *James Joyce; Dubliners; Close Reading.*

*Ulysses* is a book of absences.

In spite of its all-inclusive, encyclopaedic nature; in spite of what seems to be its project, its stated goal, *Ulysses* has holes. More than that, it’s perfectly possible to argue that the book has holes *because* of its stated all-inclusive project, since we know (and we know it precisely because of this book) that the minutiae of a day in the life of a nobody are potentially and effectively inexhaustible. The more you seek to encompass, the more the absences are going to make themselves felt. They are going to cry out loud they’re not there, which is, arguably, a curious, a very curious way of making themselves present.

So if *Ulysses* is indeed a book of absences, it’s precisely because it tried to become a book of all presence.

And if *Ulysses* is also a book of absences, we may even say they are only another degree of presence. Another way to make *more* fit into a finite scheme. After all, to know we don’t know something is a way to know (about) it. There is a huge difference between the real unknown and the *veiled*. And *that* is maybe the kind of absence most characteristic of *Ulysses*, most characteristic of Joyce’s entire output as a writer, and perhaps most characteristic of all great literature.

So *Ulysses*, let’s restate it, is a book of *controlled* veilings, a book of *felt* absences that contribute a great deal to its structural weight and its thematic development.

That can be seen in many levels. For in a book that tells us pretty much everything we could or couldn’t think we wanted to know about Leopold Bloom (whom we get to know *from dandruff to haemorrhoids*, in the sweet words of David Hayman, 75), we are nevertheless left with doubt and curiosity: when is Bloom’s birthday, why did he keep that ribbon in his first drawer (*U* 642), why does he want a ‘fresh’ supply of carbon monoxide in every room of his dream house (*U* 635)?

Structurally, it's not only the adultery, in many ways the central event of that day, which is kept from our view. We also do not get to see Bloom for perhaps more than two hours, between the moment in which he leaves Kiernan's pub and the moment in which he sees Gerty at the beach. And these few hours are arguably the most important of his day, at least in terms of concrete impact on the world and the lives of others, since it's then that he tries to provide for the future of Dignam's derelict family.

*Ulysses*, the book of everything, has its way of leaving lots of things unsaid. And of making the reader wonder.

And for the first time reader of the book, it may even look like there will be a huge hole in its perspective. For the book of everybody is, till the last episode, mostly and almost exclusively a book of men. Even when its women are, in a way, central, it's arguable that they are their men's version of themselves, and this is most sensitively true about that same Gerty McDowell.

But the episode that scholars tend to call *Penelope*, and that most readers, and even non-readers, quickly identify with Molly Bloom's soliloquy is what eventually avoids this lopsidedness. And I do believe that the *manoeuvre* by which Joyce has balanced the book through giving Molly unprecedented time, space, leeway and freedom is indeed one of the great marvels of literature. But even then, even when bridging this gap, Joyce was playing with the idea of the perception of an absence: he could only fill in this hole after creating it by building an expectation, by playing with what a musician would easily identify as tension with no resolution. No release.

Because even a hypothetical reader so engrossed by Bloom and the others not to realize Molly's absence will, when confronted with her presence, acknowledge the lack previously ignored. Joyce could make a presence underline an absence just as well as he made an absence shine like a presence.

And it is another woman the person who can be yet another kind of *missing link*, of revealing absence.

All readers realize that there is a strong connection between *Ulysses* and Joyce's previous prose works. Obviously the most direct of these connections is with *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, with Stephen Dedalus practically turning both books into one. But the lines linking *Ulysses* to *Dubliners* are not that much weaker. A whole slew of characters present in those stories grace *Ulysses* not only with their presence, but most of the time with all the weight of our previous knowledge of their personalities and/or predicaments. When we get to *Ulysses* with a memory of Lenehan's vagaries, of Cunningham's mercy, of Doran's marriage, we certainly bring to the book another kind of absence/presence, and we are certainly giving *Ulysses* a whole new dimension in character development and 'plot' design.

But that woman alluded to above may be even more central, even though (this objection is merely a formality, as it might be rather clear by now) she does not appear in *Ulysses*, above all because of the fact that she is dead on July 16<sup>th</sup>, 1904.

Emily Sinico died right close to the end of the story *A Painful Case*. That's not a way to time someone's death, but it's what we're left with in the case of this most mysterious character for, in what is a most *unjoycean* slip (Should we italicize the word, here? Was it done on purpose?), even the day she died is not something we can know for sure. In the story we see Mr. Duffy reading about her death, which occurred *yesterday evening* (126), after going home *through the November twilight* (125). In *Ulysses*, though, Bloom asks Dedalus if he had known *Mrs Emily Sinico, accidentally killed at Sidney Parade Railway Station, 14 October 1903* (U 616). Although this is 'narrated' through one of the voices that pose Questions and Answers on the episode known as *Ithaca*, we have to remember that this episode is quite consistent in terms of numbers, days and hours, being a manifestation of a somewhat *scientific* spirit. More than that, this initial supposition about the day of her death is confirmed later on when Bloom finds in his coat pocket a coin, which would have been put there (*presumably*) *on the occasion* (17 *october 1903*) *of the interment of Mrs Emily Sinico* (U 631).

This discrepancy in a way underlines the centrality of that moment. Why would the author make us notice this day: the day Emily Sinico died? Why would it be so important to Bloom, who remembers twice this *interment*? And also, but not less importantly, why would the *objective* style of *Ithaca* record her death as unqualifiedly *accidental*, when so much has been made, in the undertones of the final pages of *A painful case*, of the unclear nature of the accident that killed her?

Did Emily Sinico commit suicide? Was her *accidental* death caused by alcohol? Was it intentional?

The first version of the story was written, as most of the book in which it came to be published, in 1905 (Gabler). Joyce was writing, as Machado de Assis, for instance (*Dom Casmurro* had been published in 1900), in the shadow of the *great adulteresses* of the mid-nineteenth century: Emma Bovary (whose name Emily almost repeats), who appeared in 1857, and Anna Karenina, (whose form of death she almost repeats), in the novel published twenty years after Flaubert's.

Joyce had to be conscious of these resonances, of course, and he chooses to create his first major adultery narrative (*Exiles* and *Ulysses* were still to come) with some differences.

Point of view, to begin with.

Flaubert chose to be close to Emma; Tolstoy was a bit more distanced, but Anna was his reference, at least more than Vronsky and Karenin; Machado de Assis focused the 'betrayed' husband: Joyce, at least here, would accompany the adulterer.

Another big difference is the nature of that *adultery*.

Emma and Anna were indeed involved in extra-conjugal relationships. We'll never know about Capitu, but we are quite sure that nothing ever happened between Emily and James Duffy. More than that, it is the insinuation of a possibility of sexual, or at least intimate, contact that eventually breaks up their relationship. For Duffy would not have the purity of that companionship soiled by that.

If we think that adultery is indeed one of the major themes in *Ulysses*, and that Boylan, the adulterer, is in fact the only character that we do *not* get to see in full, this already is one situation in which the story provides a sort of complement to *Ulysses*. A different *adulterer*, but a different point of view, nonetheless.

The final plot point that should be mentioned here is suicide. The *natural* conclusion to adultery in that moment.

Capitu dies alone, banished. Emma and Anna die by their own initiative. But Emily Sinico dies either in an accident, or following an intentional gesture, be it her descent into alcoholic oblivion or her *de facto* suicide.

And suicide, as much as adultery, and although we may not remember it, is a constant question in *Ulysses*.

Not only Bloom's father commits suicide. That whole day lives under the constant shadow of *the man that was drowned nine days ago* (U 51) in Dublin Bay, whose death is always left unspecified, and who should *turn up* (U 77) on that June 16<sup>th</sup>. In a day that begins with a burial (Dignam's) we are still left with an unburied corpse.

Even Leopold Bloom, even easygoing Poldy, contemplates suicide in more than one occasion: first (U 152) when, crossing the Liffey (where Dodd's son also tried to commit his own pathetic suicide (U 96)), he thinks *if I threw myself down?*; in *Circe*, out of the blue, it is the word "suicide" that pops into Bloom's head (U 455), and soon after lots of *attractive and enthusiastic women also commit suicide* (U 463); in *Ithaca* (the same episode in which we get to know that strange plan of Bloom's, of having piped carbon monoxide in his dreamhouse), we are informed that one of his main fears is that of committing suicide while he sleeps (U 641)!

Even unconsciously that theme resonates in Bloom's mind, as when he tries to speak Italian to Dedalus and, perhaps trying to say he wants a beautiful woman, ends up by declaring his desire for the *deadly nightshade* (*Belladonna voglio* (U 542)).

That almost-adulterer, that quasi-suicidal woman, in a book published eight years before *Ulysses*, is already revealing herself as a bit of a seed. It's almost as if we were thinking in musical terms, an idea which is never out of question with Joyce. It's almost as if Emily Sinico sounds some *themes* that will receive further development in the novel. And this idea is strongly underlined by the fact that the memory of her, and of her death, occupies quite some time of Bloom's thoughts later that day.

And this happens for a reason. Because the point, in a sonata or in *Ulysses*, is that we have to be aware of these recurrences, we have to hear the repetitions *as* repetitions. And that's why Mrs. Sinico has to be present through her absence. That's why she has to be another corpse floating next to those characters.

And this presence can (again indirectly) be even more unmistakable in the book if we think of another *mysterious* character: the man in the brown mackintosh.

His identity in *Ulysses* is left famously open, although he pops up through the book (U 111, 112, 114, 254, 373, 424, 459, 475, 568...) , always as an unidentified quantity: *what selfimposed enigma did Bloom ... not comprehend? Who was M'Intosh?*

(U 650). His first appearance, in *Hades*, when he will acquire the agnomen M'Intosh, through no design of Bloom's (though the responsibility is ultimately his), would place him there (who seems not to be directly interested in Dignam's funeral) for some other reason. And we get to know (in *Cyclops*) that he *loves a lady who is dead* (U 332).

That seems feeble as a connection between this man and Mr. Duffy (to begin with, did he *love* Mrs. Sinico?). But the fact that this *brown* cloak is his sole identifier through the novel articulates rather well with the meaning of the name Duffy, which comes from the Irish word for *swarthy* (Giles, 204).

Vladimir Nabokov famously argued that Mackintosh was Joyce himself (Alexandrov, 441). Well, and what about the fact that Mr. Duffy is indeed *James* Duffy?

We know that Joyce loved to play with names (he even makes Molly exclaim *O Jamesy* in *Penelope* (U 691)), and when we notice that his given name appears only three times in the whole of *Dubliners* we have to look carefully at those occurrences. And we have to start with the curious information that both Mr. Duffy and the man who drove the train that hit Mrs. Sinico are called James. And if that was not enough to establish the symbolical connection between those responsible for her death, we can remember that the driver was a certain James Lennon, whose name means *lover*.

The third James in *Dubliners* is of course father James Flynn, in *The Sisters*<sup>1</sup>. Would it be a mere coincidence that the name of the conductor who did indeed hit one Mrs. Bishop in 1904 (an incident on which Joyce drew to recreate the accident with Mrs. Sinico (Williams)) was as matter of fact Flynn? Of course Lennon and Flynn are common Irish names. But we are left with this fourfold articulation of *lover*, *killer*, *damned* and *author*, all concerned in one way or another with the figure of Mr. Duffy, with Emily Sinico and, through them, both with *Dubliners* and *Ulysses*.

Another relevant connection between the story and the novel makes the musical chime once more in the prose. For Mr. Duffy and Mrs. Sinico meet in the audience of a concert (they only talk in the interval, as good music lovers do), and one of the sole distractions of Duffy's almost monastic life comes from his going to the opera once in a blue moon. And he is driven to this worldly pleasure because of *his liking for Mozart's music* (121). Not only Mozart appears, but he comes as a disruptive element that *makes* a disciplined, ascetical self-denier look for something as mundane as the opera. It would not be an overstatement if we thought of Mozart as sin-inducing in the story.

And the fact is that Mozart's music, especially his opera *Don Giovanni* is absolutely central to the thematic development of *Ulysses*. The very first mention of Molly's future lover, when she receives his letter in the morning, brings also the information about the songs she will sing in the supposed *rehearsal* that's going to take place that afternoon. She is singing *Love's Old Sweet Song*, an old staple of parlor singers, with a title that makes it obviously and directly relevant in that context, and also something called *Là ci darem...* (U 65)

Someone who's not familiarized with the operatic repertoire (which is definitely *not* Molly's, and Bloom's, case) will take some time to realize that she is referring to the duet *Là ci darem la mano*, from Mozart and Da Ponte's version of the Don Juan story.



*Love's Old Sweet Song* indeed.

More still, the aria, a very famous piece, is the fulcral point in the opera where Don Giovanni seduces the poor (in economic terms... she is everything but a *poor girl*) Zerlina right after dismissing her fiancé Mazetto. The duet is a 'battle', of sorts, where Don Giovanni tries to woo Zerlina with promises of marriage, and she keeps saying that she would be perfectly willing to do so, if it was not for the doubt that he might not be true to her. This is the moment when she sings her *vorrei e non vorrei* (I'd like to and I wouldn't) which generates all kinds of concerns for Bloom during the day, because he misremembers the lyrics and wonders if Molly can properly pronounce the Italian *voglio*, conveniently *absent* from the aria.

It should be noted, then, that this misconstruction exchanges a conditional tense for the certainty of the present. In Bloom's mind, in consequence of that, Molly's Italian should read *voglio e non vorrei* which would at the same time affirm her desire (*io voglio*) but transform the meaning of the whole sentence into something like *I want but I won't*, which is sadly also the conclusion, apparently, of Mrs. Sinico's story.

There's much too much in this aria, and we can't discuss it all here. What matters now is the fact that once more we see Mozart introduced as a shortword for sin, or at least for temptation.

Another *Don Giovanni* connection comes from Bloom's mind, when already in *Lestrygonians*, after leaving his house for his odyssey, he starts humming *Don Giovanni, a cenar teco m'invitasti* (U 179-80), which will lead him to thinking about that word "teco", the only one whose meaning he cannot glean. Again, someone with no familiarity with the music, someone led only by the happy-go-lucky tone which underlies these thoughts (*Feel better. Burgundy. Good pick me up.*), can easily lose the ominous background that the music sets here.

The aria Bloom hums right now, after all, is from the last scene of the libretto written by Lorenzo da Ponte; it's from the moment the statue of the *commendatore* slayed by Don Giovanni in Act I comes, supernaturally, to take his soul, or to make him repent (which he, famously, refuses to do). These are indeed the first words spoken by this apparition in the scene. It's death. It's destiny saying I've come to collect my dues.

And this music, which some historians credit with being the first instance of *terror* represented in occidental music, follows Bloom throughout the day (U 466), tainting, subconsciously, even his merriest moments.

And it's probably desirable (and designed, by Joyce) to remember that in the opera, the orchestral music that accompanies those words had in fact already been heard, without its full terrific potential being realized, in the first bars of the overture. The first seconds of the opera. If Hall can say that *Joyce was able, by alluding to the opera's plot and quoting the libretto, to achieve the same montage effects that he did by employing the Odyssey* (78), we have to note that he was also emulating a musical procedure, familiar to Mozart himself.

And if the music, and the words, of *Don Giovanni* provide such a fertile and rich background for much of the plot of *Ulysses*, in a certain subterranean, continuous

and pervasive way, what can we say of the fact that when Mr. Duffy sits at his landlady's piano to play Mozart as a soundtrack for his own sad story, this music also unites again *Dubliners* and the novel yet unwritten at that moment.

We know *Ulysses* began its life as a project for another short story to be included in *Dubliners* (Ellmann, 162). We know the stories in *Dubliners* tend to reveal deep connections to one another when scrutinized properly. We know some characters from one book appear again in the other, and we know this is effectively done by Joyce as a way to magnify impacts and effects.

But what if the idea behind this essay is more than wishful reading? What if we can find deep relations between *Ulysses* and a story whose characters do *not* appear on June 16<sup>th</sup>, 1904. (Or do they?) Am I too eagerly over-reading when I notice that there is a Constable 57 in *Ulysses* as well as at the scene of Mrs. Sinico's death? When I remember that she and her husband lived in *Leoville*?

Much has been said of *Exiles* as a study, as preparation work on the theme of adultery, as a previous effort that would enable Joyce to write *Ulysses*. Much has been said, obviously, of the connection between *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*. But what if this reading of *A Painful Case* raises the possibility of other, thematic, resonances?

Can we see the contrast Emily/Molly (are their names too similar?) as an evidence of a movement away from the established *ways* of nineteenth century fiction and towards a liberation, an epiphany, a freeing? Is it meaningful that Emily's daughter is called Mary, or, in Ireland, another Molly?

Emily Sinico, whose name (from the latin *aemulus*) really means *rival*, and whose family name (although much has already been made of it) may be simply a reference to the Italian Cinico, cynical, is indeed repelled as an enemy, as a dog (*doglike* would be the ultimate Greek meaning of the word *cynical*), and dies accordingly, as the canons of those days would prescribe to a female character.

A painful case indeed, not only because of what happens to her, but because of the way we are condemned to see everything from the point of view of a narrator who chooses to stick by his *man*<sup>2</sup>. If, on the other hand, like Hall, we decide to remember that the painful case of the title may not be the death of Emily Sinico, but the bleak, cold, somber portrait of that selfsame man, we can think that the connection between the story and the novel may even be interpreted differently.

Because Marion Tweedy becomes Molly Bloom and becomes the *moly* that saves Odiseus from the witchcraft of Circe in the *Odyssey*. Because that tense, unresolved, sad and painful version of love is thoroughly rewritten years later.

It may not only be that, as in some other instances, Joyce *used* characters and facts presented first in the short stories to underline or to amplify themes, ideas and the overall pathos of *Ulysses*. In this case, in this particularly painful case, faced, as we are, with the problem of the woman (*what to do with our wives* (U 606)), the problem of suicide, the problem of love, of redemption by love, of accepting or denying love its due (*Last time I was here was Mrs Sinico's funeral. Poor papa too. The love that*

*kills* (U 116)), of adultery and of conjugal unsatisfaction, we are deeper into Joyce's mind than, for instance, the biographical parallels between Duffy and Joyce's younger brother Stanislaus would seem to point<sup>3</sup>.

It could almost be the case that *the story may seem in part a protective shield for an uneasy author rather than a proper mask in the fictional presentation of human behaviour* (Putz), as if Joyce here, all of twenty-three years old, was trying his hand at something he would only be fully capable of apprehending years later.

It could almost be the case that we might think of *A Painful Case* as that mozartian *overture* to *Ulysses*. A necessary counterpart. A version to be fully denied, totally overwritten by Bloom's love (*the opposite of hatred* (U 331)). By Molly's *yes*.

## Notes

- 1 The discussion of proper names in "A Painful Case" comes from Williams.
- 2 "Perhaps he may even be regarded as the less important partner of that female Other in the text that is more of a void than a presence in the plot, Mrs Sinico." Wicht.
- 3 "A Painful case is based in an entry in Stanislaus Joyce's Dublin Diary in which he records sitting beside a concert given by Clara Butt, who spoke to him in the interval; he recorded her 'fair skin and large pupils and the very pure whites of her brown eyes' also included in the story are the two sentences of Stanislaus': 'Every bond is a bond to sorrow' and, 'Love between men and woman is impossible because there must not be sexual intercourse, and friendship between a man and a woman is impossible because there must be sexual intercourse.' Joyce called his brother's aphorisms 'bile beans'." Davies.

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