

## Tashlikh on the Liffey: Merging Homer's Odyssey, Judaism, and Catholicism on the O'Connell Bridge

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James Joyce's *Ulysses* follows the journey of Leopold Bloom as he wanders through the streets of Dublin on a warm June 16<sup>th</sup> in 1904. Bloom is a mysterious character to both his fellow Dubliners as well as readers. He is often mistaken for a freemason throughout the novel. People question his nationality as an Irishman. And most often he is perceived as being Jewish, along with all of the stereotypes associated with it. However, as Cormac Ó Gráda explains in *Jewish Ireland in the Age of Joyce: A Socioeconomic History*, "by strictly confessional criteria, of course, Leopold Bloom was not a Jew. His mother was a Gentile; his father was an apostate; their son was neither circumcised nor bar mitzvah'd; he married out, going through the motions of conversion to Catholicism in the process [twice]; he flouted the Jewish dietary laws; and he proclaimed himself an atheist" (2006, p. 205). The complexity surrounding Leopold Bloom in regard to his family's background merges in one particular scene with another vital plot point in the novel: the guilt he feels over the death of his son, Rudy, and its impact on his strained marriage with his wife, Molly. It is in this scene that Joyce reveals an almost subconscious amalgam of Bloom's Catholic and Jewish selves, revealing the depth of his loss not only as a father and husband, but also as someone with each foot in a different Dublin – belonging nowhere and yet somehow fitting in perfectly.

The scene we will investigate blends the Catholicism and Judaism of Bloom's complex life in an intricate, yet decodable, way. It makes sense not only because of Bloom's cultural and historical background, but also because of Joyce's own views on Judaism. As Erwin Steinberg writes in "James Joyce and the Critics Notwithstanding, Leopold Bloom Is Not Jewish", "There is even some question whether Joyce considered

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Christ Jewish. Ellmann [Richard Ellmann, Joyce's biographer] says that in his first letter to Martha Fleischmann Joyce wrote that he hoped 'she will not mind...if he suggests that perhaps she is Jewish, though she may not be, for after all Jesus lay in the womb of a Jewish mother'" (1981, p. 35). To complicate matters further, "We also learn from Molly that Bloom has always been an atheist who has tried to convert her by claiming that Jesus was the first socialist (*U* 18.178), that we 'have no soul inside only grey matter' (*U* 18.141-2) and that Buddhism is a greater religion than Christianity or Judaism (*U* 18.1204)" (Lernout 2009, p. 338). So not only is Joyce ethnically Jewish on his father's side, Christian on his mother's side, Catholic by choice in a Catholic-dominant country, but he is privately an atheist as well. These complexities and their impact on Bloom's subconscious in how he struggles with fear and guilt unavoidably spill out in *Ulysses*.

The hidden significance of the scene in question we will explore from the "Lestrygonians" episode – section eight – lies in the Jewish New Year, known as Rosh Hashanah, and the practice of Tashlikh during this holiday. Joyce even comically refers to this holiday in book II, chapter 3 of *Finnegans Wake* as "roshashanaral" (1959, p. 293), a blending of "Russian general" and "Rosh Hashanah". According to Ira Nadel in *Joyce and the Jews: Culture and Texts*, the story from *Finnegans Wake* from which this quote appears is "of Buckley (Butt) shooting the Russian General (353.15-21), a figure with symbolic roots in Judaism through his association with Rosh Hashanah, the festival of the New Year" (1989, p. 102). On the afternoon of Rosh Hashanah, next to a natural body of flowing water such as a river, the penitent Jew recites the Tashlikh prayer and throws his or her sins into the water, typically symbolized by pieces of bread. The term "Tashlikh" comes from Micah 7:18-20: "You will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea" (esv.org). During the feast of Rosh Hashanah there are two highly symbolic foods: bread and apples. In addition to the sins being cast away, the bread symbolizes the manna, an edible substance, provided by God to the Israelites as they wandered in the desert for forty years. The apple is symbolic of life. Both foods are significant in *Ulysses* as we will see.

Jewish references in Joyce's works are also not confined merely to one ritual or holiday. Yom Kippur and Passover are frequently referenced. And for the self-imposed exile, Joyce wrote quite often with allusions to Exodus in *Finnegans Wake*. Ira Nadel writes, "The purpose of such references is not only to illustrate certain doublings between Judaic and Christian rituals but to demonstrate the centrality of Exodus in

Joyce's world" (1989, p. 31). The image of the wandering Jew is no more pronounced than Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses* as he makes his exodus from home to wander the streets of Dublin. And the doublings of Judaic and Christian rituals embody the complexity of Bloom as a character.

This brings us to the "Lestrygonians" episode of *Ulysses* in which Bloom is crossing over the O'Connell Bridge in Dublin sometime between 1:00 – 2:00 p.m. on his way from the offices of the *Freeman's Journal*, where he works, to the National Library. Bloom stumbles across a woman selling apples and Banbury cakes, buys a couple of the pastries, and feeds the hungry seagulls from the bridge. It is a seemingly passive scene, filled with fragmentary musings, as Bloom makes his way from one place to another. The scene is as follows:

The flow of the language it is. The thoughts. Solemn.

*Hamlet, I am thy father's spirit*

*Doomed for a certain time to walk the earth.*

– Two apples a penny! Two for a penny!

His gaze passed over the glazed apples serried on her stand. Australians they must be this time of year. Shiny peels: polishes them up with a rag or a handkerchief.

Wait. Those poor birds.

He halted again and bought from the old applewoman two Banbury cakes for a penny and broke the brittle paste and threw its fragments down into the Liffey. See that? That gulls swooped silently, two, then all from their heights, pouncing on prey. Gone. Every morsel. Aware of their greed and cunning he shook the powdery crumb from his hands. They never expected that. Manna. Live on fish, fishy flesh they have, all seabirds, gulls, seagoose. Swans from Anna Liffey swim down here sometimes to preen themselves. No accounting for tastes. Wonder what kind is swanmeat. Robinson Crusoe had to live on them.

They wheeled flapping weakly. I'm not going to throw any more. Penny quite enough. Lot of thanks I get. Not even a caw. They spread foot and mouth disease too. If you cram a turkey say on chestnutmeal it tastes like that. Eat pig like pig. But then why is it that saltwater fish are not salty? How is that?

His eyes sought answer from the river... (1986, pp. 125-126).

Let us begin our deconstruction of this scene with a Catholic allusion. Bloom comes across an “old applewoman” selling apples in the afternoon, when the ritual of Tashlikh would be performed on Rosh Hashanah. While Genesis of the Old Testament never reveals the precise fruit in the Garden of Eden from which Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat, this fruit has commonly been portrayed as an apple. Hence, the old applewoman selling apples is representative of Eve, tempting Bloom – or Adam – with her wares. It was the tasting of this forbidden fruit, pressured by Satan disguised as a serpent, which brought sin into the world. The bread in Tashlikh is symbolic of sin and guilt and so it is appropriate that the Banbury cakes are sold by the symbolic Eve: the applewoman tempting passersby – in this case, Bloom – with sin. Throughout the day, Bloom is tempted by women such as Martha Clifford in her letters, Gerty MacDowell on the beach, and the prostitutes in Nighttown. Bloom’s guilt, as we will see, is entwined with Molly, his wife, though blame cannot entirely be placed on her. Bloom is a sort of anti-Odysseus in the Homeric scaffolding of the novel, wandering toward a home infiltrated by a potential usurper, encountering various characters and challenges on his journey which culminates in a return home to his wife with a son-like figure in Stephen Dedalus. Bloom is also reflective of an anti-Adam as a man with an absent yet influential father figure (Rudolph, who lingers in Bloom’s thoughts all day, committed suicide), forced out of the paradise of his home to wander as the result of his sinful wife. Bloom is the realistic, everyman version of these archetypal figures. Furthermore, Rosh Hashanah marks the Jewish anniversary of God’s creation of Adam and Eve, blending the Judaic and Catholic elements in this scene.

The Jewish components of this “Lestrygonians” scene also begin to emerge early on. Bloom’s “gaze passed over” (1986, p. 125) the apples. This is subtle a reference to the Jewish holiday of Passover which celebrates the Jewish people’s exodus from their bondage in Egypt. The Banbury cakes Bloom purchased are also commonly known as Eccles cakes. Bloom lives at 7 Eccles Street in Dublin which further binds him to the significance of the pastry. Bloom even considers the fragmentary image of “manna” (1986, p. 126) in his brief musings while feeding the birds the Banbury cake. Manna, as mentioned earlier, was the edible substance provided by God to save the Jews as they wandered in the desert during their exodus from Egypt. This is all highly significant as Passover is the celebration of the Jews fleeing Egypt and manna references their wandering in the desert. Likewise, Bloom is wandering through Dublin in the novel, almost reenacting the wandering of his father’s ancestors. Just as Catholicism and

Judaism are being blurred together in this scene, so are the holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Passover.

We know from Joyce's own notebooks that the Banbury cakes were important for this scene in *Ulysses* because as early as October of 1918, while in Zurich, Joyce wrote in his *Ulysses* notebook the brief mention of "banbury cakes" (N2 [VI.D.7] / u8.2 [Rosenbach]). It is fascinating that in this primary source from which Joyce wrote down various details and notes regarding Dublin for use in his novel, he found Banbury cakes important enough to record. This wasn't simply a last-minute offhand detail, easily replaced by any other food which could have been sold on the street. There was an intentionality and symbolic significance behind it.

Then, in the most revealing portion of the scene, Bloom "broke the brittle paste and threw its fragments down into the Liffey" (1986, p. 125). This is very similar to the practice of Tashlikh in which the penitent's guilt and sins are symbolically cast into the naturally flowing body of water. The "brittle paste" sounds similar to matzoh, the unleavened flatbread eaten by the Jews as they fled bondage in Egypt and wandered through the desert in search of the Promised Land. Again, we have Bloom wandering throughout Dublin – his desert – with his destination being home. Just as Bloom is an anti-Odysseus and anti-Adam, his wandering and homely destination are warped interpretations of the Jewish Exodus reflected in the holiday of Passover. It is also worth considering the significance of "home" to Joyce's novel which is also scaffolded off of *The Odyssey* written by "Homer". While the previous is the destination, the latter is the journey.

The Banbury cakes are used throughout the novel to represent Bloom's guilt. Margaret Church, in "The Play of Imagery: A Critical Approach", writes of the "Circe" episode – section fifteen –, "...Babes and Sucklings cry out: 'Cakes in his pocket for Leo alone', suggesting that Bloom may feed the gulls but not children, very likely indicating Bloom's repressed guilt feelings about the death of Rudy. In connection with guilt, we think of the stale cake Bloom had thrown to the hungry gulls from the deck of the Erin's King. It is the memory of this action which immediately precedes his buying the fresh Banbury cakes for the gulls on the Liffey" (1978, p. 44). Rudy, Bloom's only son, died 11 days after birth and this loss haunts him throughout the novel. It was Rudy's death that was the genesis of his decade-long abstinence from Molly which leads to her infidelity on June 16<sup>th</sup> with Hugh "Blazes" Boylan. The casting of these Banbury cakes into the River Liffey is a subconscious casting of Bloom's guilt

regarding his son and wife. He reflected on the death of infants earlier in the “Hades” episode – section six – that, “if it’s healthy it’s from the mother. If not from the man” (1986, p. 79). Bloom associates sex with his wife with the death of his son, hence the ten-year abstinence. “Bloom himself seems to place some of the responsibility on Molly who ‘could never like it again after Rudy’ (U p. 168), and she concurs, ‘well I’d never have another our 1st death too it was we were never the same since’ (U p. 778)” (Benstock 1978, p. 175). Bloom can physically engage in sexual acts, as revealed in the “Nausicaa” episode – section thirteen – when he masturbates on the beach and he is emotionally passionate as revealed in his letters to Martha Clifford and his attraction for Molly. However, he cannot seem to shake an association regarding the act of sex with Molly leading to the death of Rudy. And his guilt is certainly felt in his emotional affair with Clifford as he receives another letter from her the same morning Molly’s lover, Boylan, sends her a letter. Sex, death, and guilt are all interwoven in these complicated relationships. And it is during Rosh Hashanah when God writes the names of the righteous in the book of life for another year; according to Jewish belief, Rudy’s name would have not been included in this book which only adds further complexity to Bloom’s sense of guilt on this holiday. It could be suggested that this contributes to his atheistic views concerning God at this point in his life. We cannot know for certain the cause for Bloom’s atheism given his Jewish-Protestant-Catholic background, but it is certainly plausible that experiencing the loss of a child while believing in a Judeo-Christian God who determines such fates would contribute to a loss in faith.

Rudy’s death also factors into the “Lestrygonians” scene with Bloom thinking about Shakespeare’s poetry. He quotes to himself a line from Hamlet in Act I, scene 5 in which the ghost of Hamlet’s father speaks with his son: “*Hamlet, I am thy father’s spirit / Doomed for a certain time to walk the earth*” (1986, p. 125). While Joyce alters the word “term” for “time” and “earth” for “night” as Bloom likely misremembers it, the quote is unmistakable. There is no alteration in syllables with this edit and it could be viewed simply as an error of memory. Bloom commonly misremembers various lines of literature or scripture throughout the novel. However, replacing “Doomed for a certain *term* to walk the *night*” for “Doomed for a certain *time* to walk the *earth*” sounds more appropriate in the context of the Jews wandering the desert (earth) for forty years (time). And Shakespeare’s own son, Hamnet, died when he was only 11-years-old, roughly the same age Rudy would be in the novel if he hadn’t passed away. In the play we have father and son seeking peace from one another beyond the grave, albeit in

opposite orientations from Bloom and Rudy. The ghost of Hamlet's father reaches out to his son to bring his murderer to justice in order to have peace in the afterlife while Bloom seeks solace regarding the death of his son, thinking about him all day and even calling out to him at the end of a hallucination in the "Circe" episode later in the evening.

Significantly, one of the other protagonists of *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus from Joyce's previous novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, has a theory that he expands upon in the "Scylla and Charybdis" episode – section nine – regarding Shakespeare's relationship with his deceased son and the roles in his play, *Hamlet*. This fits in appropriately to Stephen's own storyline given that the relationship with his father, Simon, is highly strained. According to Colin MacCabe in *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word*, "For Stephen, *Hamlet* must be read from the position of the ghost, from the character he imagines that Shakespeare acted and from whose situations he constructs the meaning of Shakespeare's life and plays" (2003, p. 119). Just as Stephen Dedalus's relationship with his father is straining, he obsesses over a literary theory revolving around Hamnet and Shakespeare being embodied by Hamlet and his father's ghost, simultaneously reflective of Rudy and Bloom in a novel scaffolded from the epic poem about Telemachus and Odysseus attempting to be reunited and filled with son/father dynamics including that of Adam and God. *Ulysses* can be viewed entirely as a study in consanguineous homogeneity. And it is Bloom's loss of Rudy that resides at the center of his complex guilt and yearning for emotional, if not spiritual, penance.

The storyline of Rudy and Bloom is not entirely one founded in the fictitious imagination. Preceding the completion of *Ulysses*, Joyce and Nora Barnacle, who already had a son, Giorgio, and daughter, Lucia, lost a child in 1908. "...Nora, who was about three months pregnant, suffered a miscarriage on August 4," writes Richard Ellmann. "She did not much mind losing the third child, but Joyce carefully examined the foetus, 'whose truncated existence,' he said to Stanislaus [his brother], 'I am probably the only one to regret'" (1959, pp. 268-269). Just as Molly was able to recover from the death of an infant while Bloom carried the loss more heavily, Nora did not seem as affected by the miscarriage as Joyce. This further binds the emotional complexity of Bloom to that of his creator, Joyce, which helps to explain the depth and realism of the character in this "Lestrygonians" scene.

It is also significant that Bloom thinks of this line from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, out of all the possibilities he could quote, when considering famished gulls flying over

the Liffey beneath the O'Connell Bridge. As the thought of feeding the gulls enters his mind, the association with fatherhood and Rudy manifests. This connects to the scene in the "Circe" episode mentioned earlier in which there is a connection between the Banbury cakes and Rudy. Hamlet's father, like Bloom, is a wanderer in search of a son. "Bloom, whose knowledge of Torah is minimal, his understanding of the Jewish holidays limited, none the less seeks to recall the dead," (1989, p. 97) according to Ira Nadel. Even the phrase from the "Lestrygonians" scene, "The flow of the language it is" (1986, p. 125) carries with it a river-like quality, like the flow of water, as Bloom looks down on to the Liffey. It is important that Bloom considers his thoughts on language "solemn" (1986, p. 125) given the context.

The River Liffey itself is symbolically significant for this "Lestrygonians" scene as well. It is the naturally flowing body of water which washes away the penitent Jew's sins. Cormac Ó Gráda explains how "in the early 1890s Dublin possessed 'an extensive and well-built system of street drains,' but its house drains were of poor quality, and it still relied on the River Liffey as its main sewage outlet" (2006, p. 43). It wouldn't be until 1906, two years after *Ulysses* takes place, that the newer sewage system, modeled on London's, would become operational. And so, one of the River Liffey's primary purposes in Dublin at this time was to carry away the waste of its citizens. It makes sense that it would also carry away the sins of its citizens as well. Human waste can be viewed as a manifested symbol of the spiritual sin people innately accumulate, feel shame over, and wish to discreetly yet quickly discard. The O'Connell Bridge can thus represent the crossing over from one Dublin to another, from an old life of sin and guilt to a new one of purity and virtue. Though Bloom doesn't exactly follow this moral track, the symbolism of the bridge is appropriate for the purpose of Tashlikh and Rosh Hashanah, welcoming in the new year from the old.

This brings us to the gulls being fed by Bloom's Banbury cakes, his manna. They are described with "their greed and cunning" (1986, p. 125). These would be common anti-Semitic stereotypes associated with Jews. Vincent Cheng writes in *Joyce, Race, and Empire* of the many anti-Semitic comments made about Bloom by other Dubliners throughout the novel. However, "Bloom is – as we have seen – as much a product of the dominant cultural discourse as they are, having also (and inevitably) absorbed the culture's Orientalist discourse and racist terminology" (1995, p. 185). These gulls not only reflect common anti-Semitic stereotypes; they are also not kosher. According to Leviticus 11:13-19, "And these you shall detest among the birds; they

shall not be eaten; they are detestable:...the sea gull..." (evs.org). Fish-eating birds and birds of prey are considered non-kosher. Bloom even comments that the gulls are "pouncing on prey" (1986, p. 125). This, in a sense, combines the fish-eating and bird of prey aspect of the gulls. There is also the homonym of "pray" here as in praying during service such as Tashlikh. Equally non-kosher are the swans and pigs mentioned at the end of the "Lestrygonians" scene.

According to Jeffrey Cohen in *1,001 Questions and Answers on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur*, in regard to Tashlikh, "perhaps the most popular interpretation links *Tashlikh* to the *Midrash* which states that, in order to frustrate Abraham's journey to the *Akedah*, Satan transformed himself into a swollen river, blocking Abraham's way. Abraham walked through it, up to his neck, undaunted, crying out to God to save his life, whereupon God rebuked Satan, and the river dried up" (1997, pp. 271-272). We have a return of Satan from the story of the Garden of Eden, but also a Jew wandering out into the middle of a river and looking to God for help. At the end of the scene on the O'Connell Bridge, as Bloom would have been in the middle of the River Liffey – albeit dry already from standing on the bridge – Joyce writes, "His eyes sought an answer from the river..." (1986, p. 126). This yearning from the river completes Joyce's symbolic Tashlikh nicely before Bloom continues on his way. And Abraham's journey to the *Akedah* was the binding of Isaac, found in Genesis 22, in which complying with God's instructions, Abraham was going to sacrifice his son. Unlike with Rudy and Bloom, however, God's test of Abraham resulted in the sparing of Isaac's life. The sacrifice of a son to a seemingly unjust God is yet another similarity displayed in this scene on the O'Connell Bridge, blending Bloom's Jewish and Catholic background – which both incorporate the Old Testament in their faith – in regard to the death of Rudy.

Bloom is no stranger to experiencing the Jewish heritage of his family's past in his present life and thoughts. "In 'Aeolus', Joyce provides a direct reference and commentary on Exodus through his citation of Passover which ritualises the going forth of the Jews from Egypt," according to Ira Nadel. "Observing the typesetter at work reminds Bloom that Hebrew, like the reversed type, is also read right to left" (1989, p. 29). While in the newspaper offices, where Bloom was just before crossing the O'Connell Bridge, he contemplates the reading of Hebrew from right to left while watching the typesetter. Catholicism, too, enters his thoughts throughout the day. In the "Lotus Eaters" episode – section five – Bloom sits in a church, watching communion, and thinks to himself, "The priest bent down to put it into her mouth... *Corpus*: body.

Corpse...Rum idea: eating bits of a corpse. Why the cannibals cotton to it” (1986, p. 66). Then later, in the “Lestrygonians” episode, Bloom orders lunch at Davy Byrne’s and notices Plummtree’s Potted Meat. He thinks of Patrick Dignam, whose funeral he had just attended that morning and considers, “Dignam’s potted meat. Cannibals would with lemon and rice. White missionary too salty” (1986, p. 140). In the same paragraph, Bloom goes from imagining cannibals eating Christians, an image that first came to him during a Catholic service that morning, to, “Kosher. No meat and milk together. Hygiene that was what they call now. Yom Kippur fast spring cleaning inside” (1986, p. 141). In Homer’s *Odyssey*, the Lestrygonians, for which the eighth section of *Ulysses* is associated, are a race of giant man-eaters who devour Odysseus’s crew. During Catholic mass, the communion symbolizes the eating of Christ’s body (in the form of bread) and the drinking of his blood (in the form of wine) through transubstantiation. These lines from *Ulysses* tie in the Homeric scaffolding for Joyce’s novel with the Jewish use of bread for Tashlikh and the Catholic use of bread for communion through the bridging theme of cannibalism. While Bloom wanders throughout Dublin, his mind quickly wanders from thought to thought regarding his Catholic and Jewish background. The scene on the O’Connell Bridge in which Bloom subconsciously performs Tashlikh, feeding non-Kosher birds manna sold by an Eve-like applewoman in order to dispel the guilt he feels over the death of Rudy and its lasting impact on his marriage is another perfect example of Bloom’s complex worlds colliding.

Leopold Bloom is a fascinating character in the way that he cannot be easily categorized or understood. As Vincent Cheng remarks, “Bloom is able to hold simultaneous perspectives, to imagine being other and thus to transcend the monologic narrowness of a single, cycloptic perspective...” (1995, p. 177). And yet, while Bloom is certainly not Jewish in the religious sense, as Robert Tracy claims in “Leopold Bloom Fourfold: A Hungarian-Hebraic-Hellenic-Hibernian Hero”, “Bloom’s Jewishness is thus a carefully contrived part of *Ulysses* and an essential element in the presentation of him as modern man, the rootless and dispossessed wanderer” (1965, p. 525). Bloom is a wanderer because he is avoiding going home; he is avoiding going home because he knows his wife, Molly, will be having an affair with Hugh “Blazes” Boylan; Molly will be having an affair because Bloom has disengaged from sexual activity regarding his wife for a decade; and Bloom has ceased having sex with Molly because he associates the act with the death of his son, Rudy. As Robert Tracy notes, “He faithfully adheres to Jewish custom by naming his son Rudolph after Rudolph Virag-Bloom, the boy’s

deceased grandfather...” (1965, p. 526-527). Rudolph, Bloom’s father, died by committing suicide which is considered a mortal sin in the Catholic faith. It cannot be lost on Bloom that his son, named after a mortal sinner, was not granted life himself.

However, while Odysseus has a son, Telemachus, searching for him and attempting to rebuke his mother’s suiters, Bloom is without a son to carry on his name. Milly, Bloom’s daughter who is away in Mullingar working at a photo shop, if she ever marries, would take the surname of her husband. In the hyper-realism of Joyce’s writing style, it is believable that the protagonist of *Ulysses* would bear the hyper-convoluted subconscious of Leopold Bloom. One can see how fitting it is for Bloom, on his Homeric exodus leading toward home, to cast his guilt and sin into the River Liffey in this scene on the O’Connell Bridge with elements of his Jewish and Catholic background. It reveals the complexity of this enigmatic character, bridging the divide between the past and present, Judaism and Catholicism, life and death.

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