

Siena Palese

Word Count: 1656

The Toll of Maternal Death in Joyce's *Ulysses*

In James Joyce's *Ulysses*(1920), Stephen Dedalus engages in contemplation regarding the concept of "Amor Matris, subjective and objective genitive"(Joyce, pp. 28), meaning "mother's love for a child (subjective) and the child's love for its mother (objective)"(Zimmerman, pp. 59). The loss of a mother carries profound significance as a symbol of ultimate maturity and isolation, and Stephen struggles with the lasting impact of his mother's death throughout. The duality of Stephen's memories of his mother renders her both a secure sanctuary and an obstacle in his progression toward artistry, paralyzing him in his unresolved emotions about love and death. Stephen's recollections of his mother in *Ulysses* determine that the loss of a mother, the most intimate relationship of human life, takes an irreparable toll on the human mind, leaving Stephen in a confused state of purgatory that encapsulates the binaries of childhood and adulthood, love and guilt, natural and unnatural, and longing and isolation.

Stephen's inability to relinquish his childlike perceptions of his mother confines him to a state of mental purgatory between childhood and adulthood. This ambiguity is revealed in his description of biblical Eve: "Heva, naked Eve. She had no navel. Gaze. Belly without blemish, bulging big, a buckler of taut vellum, no, whiteheaped corn, orient and immortal, standing from everlasting to everlasting. Womb of sin. Wombed in sin darkness I was too, made not begotten"(Joyce, pp. 38). Stephen's stream of consciousness in his contemplations of the first woman reveals his contradicting emotions regarding motherhood and its relationship to childhood. Eve's stomach did not have a navel, indicating that "she was never 'reaped', or 'devirginated'"(Matar, pp 80), and "By omitting reference to Eve's 'sowing' or 'reaping', Joyce

is implying that Stephen has seen Eve as a virgin: he has returned to the unitive perception of the child, to the Eden before the fall. Stephen is now able to see...the virgin 'belly without blemish' in the deflowered 'womb of sin'"(Matar, pp. 80). The purity and perfection in the words "belly without blemish" are directly contradicted by his reference to her "womb of sin", demonstrating that he recognizes his mother as a flawed creature. The belly references the external physical conceptualization of the pure mother, or motherhood in general. However, her internal being, or her "womb" is ridden with flaws and sinfulness. These contrasting statements reveal Stephen's unresolved and confused sentiments regarding his mother; He longs for her as the secure origin source of his being, and in that way always sees her as a perfect and intangible creature. However, he also resents her for her innate flaws and unavoidable sin. With no possibility of amending his unresolved emotions about her imperfection, Stephen is paralyzed in a state of resentment for her memory, and subsequently, for her death.

Stephen's animosity toward his mother is derived from the fact that her death reminds him of his own inevitable mortality. Stephen's "compulsory preoccupation with the death of his mother is, to a large degree, an expression of his own fear of destruction"(Boyson, pp 151). The presence of Stephen's mother lingers in his mind, serving as a perpetual reminder of death's inexorable presence and apathy toward human life. The death of a parent represents a seminal experience in a child's development, symbolic of the final transition into adulthood and isolation. Stephen's resentment likely derives from the fact that once his mother died, he lost his sense of childlike security, unable to find solace in his burgeoning artistic identity. She died before he established a secure artistic identity, and therefore, before he was ready to relinquish his grasp on his childhood.

The death of Stephen's mother forced him into the relentless realm of adulthood, leaving little room for personal development. His description of memories and nightmares regarding her death inspired confused emotions and contemplations about the capacity of the living to love the dead. He reminisces on memories of his mother; "Her glass of water from the kitchen tap when she had approached the sacrament. A cored apple, filled with brown sugar, roasting for her at the hob on a dark autumn evening. Her shapely fingernails reddened by the blood of squashed lice from the children's shirts"(Joyce, pp. 10). His vivid recollections are filled with fond depictions of his mother. The "apple filled with brown sugar" signifies a maternal and domestic comfort which evokes a nostalgic sense of childhood. The "squashed lice" represent the fulfillment of maternal sacrifice for her children because she kills the insects so that they do not have to. "Mother love is a literal or figurative enwombing"(Zimmerman, pp. 59) for Stephen, and "the ambiguity of the phrase suggests that... the boundary between the child and the mother is dissolved"(Zimmerman, pp. 59), which "means a harmonious fusion with the other, a womb-like state in which every desire and wish is satisfied by a totally selfless, totally loving other"(Zimmerman, pp. 59). Therefore, Stephen still carnally loves his mother, as it is at the essence of his being, and her memory still provides a womb-like comfort to him. However, he then recollects a dream in which

"Her glazing eyes, staring out of death, to shake and bend my soul. On me alone. The ghostcandle to light her agony. Ghostly light on the tortured face. Her hoarse loud breath rattling in horror, while all prayed on their knees. Her eyes on me to strike me down...Ghoul! Chewer of corpses! No, mother! Let me be and let me live"(Joyce, pp. 10).

These two contrasting images of his mother both alive and dead, in memory and in dream, indicate his guilt-induced fear of his mother's memory. The nightmare involving his mother is clearly not a disdain for her being, but rather, a fear of her death. Her words and actions in this nightmare seem to blame him for his wrongdoings, signified by the words "all prayed on their knees". This nightmare follows Buck Mulligan's infliction of guilt on Stephen for his refusal to kneel and pray at his mother's deathbed. He exclaims "let me be and let me live"(Joyce, pp.10), indicating that he suffers a fear of his own mortality. Therefore, Stephen's two contrasting visions of his mother demonstrate his struggles with his innate and eternal love for his mother, and his fear and guilt surrounding her death. Although he harbors much reserve in loving the memory of his mother, Stephen is incapable of forgoing all love for her, despite the fact that she is dead.

The image of the sea symbolically represents the immortality of the memory of Stephen's mother. By asking "Isn't the sea what Algy calls it: a great sweet mother? The snotgreen sea. The scrotum tightening sea"(Joyce, pp. 5), Buck Mulligan draws a parallel between Stephen's mother and the sea, thereby immortalizing her in Stephen's consciousness. Despite Buck's vulgar description of the sea, it establishes a direct link between Stephen's mother and the pristine natural world. Buck's comparison of the sea to Stephen's mother also publicizes Stephen's relationship with her. Buck reprimands Stephen for his failure to pray at the bedside of his dying mother, stating "There is something sinister in [Stephen]"(Joyce, pp. 5). This implies that there is something unnatural in the way that Stephen did not conform to his mother's wishes, as though he were rejecting the innate bond between mother and child. Although this was not the case, as Stephen was instead grappling with his fear and unresolved emotions about death, the publicization of his actions reveals his guilt for his inability to cope with his mother's death. This

pull between the natural description of the sea and the unnatural publicization of his relationship with his mother's death further complicates his emotions toward her, paralyzing him under the inescapable specter of his mother's death. As demonstrated by his fixation with the sea, his most profound memories of her offer everlasting solace, however, they also consign him to a suffocating and inextricable state of guilt and unresolved remorse.

Despite his resentment regarding his mother's death, Stephen still yearns for a maternal presence. He implores, "Touch me. Soft eyes. Soft soft soft hand. I am lonely here. O, touch me soon, now. What is the word known to all men? I am quiet here alone. Sad too. Touch, touch me"(Joyce, pp. 48). The repetition of the word 'touch' indicates an intense longing for physical proximity that embodies the profound affection encapsulated within his mother's touch. He articulates a sense of isolation that resonates universally among mankind, yet paradoxically isolates himself. Recognizing the universality of such yearning among men, he realizes that he is not truly alone. Nevertheless, his inability to assuage this yearning suggests that his self-imposed isolation arises from his fixation on his own thoughts and past relationships. While writing, Stephen asks himself: "She, she, she. What she?"(Joyce, pp. 48). "What she" denotes a lack of feminine presence in his life and the subsequent innate and natural longing for the security of another human that harbors unconditional love for him. The absence of his mother left him devoid of physical touch and of the security that the physical existence of his mother's womb offers. However, he struggles to fully accept her absence and endeavors to seek analogous solace in other women. Therefore, his complex emotions about the loss of his mother leave Stephen in a confused state of longing for physical communion, while simultaneously solidifying his incapacity to fully comprehend and reconcile his sentiments towards her.

In conclusion, the mother and the child's love is carnal, innate, and necessary. However, when death complicates this relationship, it places a psychological strain on the surviving counterpart. A dead mother will always be sustained in memory and have a lasting effect on her child, who is left to navigate the world unguided. When unprepared for this isolation, as was Stephen, this can leave the child in a state of confused mental purgatory.

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