

# Ulysses in Montreal

Portrait of the artist as a young moron.  
Jesse Brown retraces Leopold Bloom's legendary day

## Hypothesis

James Joyce's *Ulysses* is widely considered to be one of the greatest novels ever written. This month marks the 100th anniversary of the fictional journey depicted in this very important and long book. As the story goes, it was on June 16, 1904, that an advertising salesman named Leo Bloom wandered around Dublin eating cheese and thinking about stuff while some guy was at home nailing his wife.

Not much else happens in *Ulysses*, despite the fact that it's over 700 pages long and printed in a small font. The whole thing breaks down into gibberish after a while, but critics excuse Joyce for this, as he was writing decades before spell-check.

Nevertheless, Irish people are still really excited about *Ulysses*. Every June they get drunk and reenact the story in an event they call Bloomsday. This year they've extended Bloomsday into a five-month festival, and it's sure to be a wicked party. Guinness is a sponsor, and everyone will be dressing in vintage tweeds and getting totally hammered.

Like the Irish, I too enjoy beer and literature. Should I miss out on this important cultural event, just because I live in Montreal and have never actually read *Ulysses*? Can't I celebrate Bloomsday, too, right here in my neighbourhood? As Molly Bloom affirms on the last page of *Ulysses*: "Yes I said yes I will Yes."

## Method

Before setting off, I decide to consult an expert on things Joyceian: my old English professor at McGill, Yehudi Lindeman.

JESSE BROWN: Professor Lindeman, why is *Ulysses* still important?

PROFESSOR LINDEMAN: Why is *War and Peace* important? Why is *Don Quixote* important? It's survived serious criticism. It's been accepted as a standard by

which other literature is judged. It's epic, and structurally perfect.

J.B.: Yes, that's true. Now, it has been said that *Ulysses* is a play on Homer's epic poem about the adventures of Odysseus, yet there are no monsters or centaurs or fighting skeletons. How can you defend this comparison? Is it just because the two titles sound similar?

PL.: It's a key—it's incredibly clever. As I'm sure you remember from my class, Stephen Dedalus is Telemachus. But is he really? He's also like Hamlet. So it's very ambitious.

J.B.: Yes, that's true. Now, Joyce is hailed as one of the finest writers of the modern era, yet I found numerous grammatical errors and spelling mistakes in *Ulysses*. Similar errors in papers I wrote for your class resulted in my getting a "C." My question is, have you actually read this thing?

PL.: Well, the mistakes are not that crazy in *Ulysses*. Were they on purpose? Were they playful and experimental? He has such a command of language. It's part of the universalism of Joyce.

J.B.: Well, let me ask you this: upon its release, *Ulysses* was banned in many countries because of its so-called "obscene" content. And yet I was unable to find anything particularly hot, even though I skimmed through the text several times. Does this book turn you on?

PL.: Yes, Molly's daydreams do. She really gets into sex. She's really explicit. And the part about Gerty MacDowell is a little *porn-y*. And we love that about our Joyce. Good for him, and good for us.

J.B.: Professor Lindeman, tomorrow I plan on recreating Bloom's odyssey right here in Montreal. What would you advise me to do to achieve this?

PL.: Well, a lot of drinking, for sure. And employ kind of a "poetic exuberance" — fuelled by large quantities of alcohol.

## Apparatus

- Cliffs notes on *Ulysses*
- A flask of Irish whisky
- A helpful essay I find on MidtermPapers.com titled "Leopold Bloom: Anthero" [sic?]

## Observations

TELEMACHUS (CHAPTER 1)

Time: 8 A.M.

*Stephen fetched the loaf and the pot of honey and the buttercooler from the locker. Buck Mulligan sat down in a sudden pet.*

In the first section of *Ulysses*, we meet the young Stephen Dedalus. Clearly, Joyce intends this name to invoke Daedalus, a figure from Greek mythology who, according to many cartoons, was Hercules's greatest enemy. But in *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus is a poet, whom we find eating breakfast with his roommates. Just like in the novel, my roommates are fixing a meal and chatting. I consider joining them, but instead decide to hit the "snooze" button on my alarm, as I will need my rest in order to best seize this important day. As I drift back to sleep, I wonder: will I prove in my journey to be as strong as mighty Hercules, or as crafty as the wicked Daedalus?

MANISCHEWITZ (CHAPTER 8)

Time: 1 P.M.

—*Wife well?*

—*Quite well, thanks...A cheese sandwich, then. Gorgonzola, have you?*

My alarm doesn't go off, and I'm forced to skip ahead a few chapters into Leo Bloom's day. This is OK, because displacement of time is a central theme in *Ulysses*.

In this section, Leopold Bloom grabs a gorgonzola sandwich at Davy Byrne's pub and washes

it down with a glass of wine that "kindled his veins." I get a smoked meat on rye at Schwartz's and cross the street to the Copacabana, where I once knew a bartender named Dave. (Dave...Davy Byrne's pub...not too shabby.) I decide to reward myself for this textual adherence with a couple of drinks. The beer kindles a few belches.

CIRCE (CHAPTER 15)

Time: Midnight

*PRIVATE CARR: (His cap awry, advancing to Stephen) Say, how would it be, governor, if I was to bash in your jaw?*

I kept running into people I knew at the Copa, and the day just flew by. I didn't get a chance to follow Bloom's path to the library, beach or hospital. But now I'm back on track with the book. In "Circe," Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus get really faced and end up in Dublin's red-light district. I'm

so drunk that I've been getting my ass kicked at pool on my favourite table (I've memorized the warps). I find out that the guy I keep losing to is named David St-Cyr (David St-Cyr/Stephen Dedalus!). I take this as a portent and suggest to David that we cab it to Club Super Sexe down on Ste-Catherine Street.

It gets weirder. Just like in the brothel scene in *Ulysses*, David and I get into an argument with management over our bill. Things get a little hazy at this point, but I do remember having to leave one of my shoes behind as collateral.

PENELOPE (CHAPTER 18)

Time: 8 A.M.

*In what directions did listener and narrator lie? Listener, S.E. by E.: Narrator, N.W. by W.: on the 53rd parallel of latitude, N., and 6th meridian of longitude, W.: at an angle of 45° to the terrestrial equator.*

In their respective homecomings, Odysseus returned to his beloved Penelope and Leo Bloom to his Molly. Leo joins his wife in bed, and they lie head-to-foot and foot-to-head. Then Molly starts to soliloquize. I've been single for a while, so when I somehow find myself back at my apartment, I ring up a few of my exes to see if I can get them to come over and do some reverse pronation. But my dirty talk about terrestrial equators only confuses them, and I'm forced to traverse my own longitude.

## Conclusion

In an earlier novel, Joyce writes that the work of the artist is in "transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life." Last night I felt that I had achieved this, but this morning my body aches and I'm close to retransmuting my everliving life back to physical matter, and into nothing so nice as daily bread. Perhaps there was a time when I appreciated high modernist literature. But I can't drink like that anymore. □

