

# The Meaning of Stephen's Mother as a Ghost in *Ulysses*

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### Introduction

In James Joyce's *Ulysses*<sup>1)</sup>, Stephen Dedalus's aim seems to be to reconstruct his identity as an artist to be internationally praised. He likens himself to Columbanus as well as to Fiacre and Scotus of Ireland who were reputed for their missionary exploits to the continent (U:3.193). In addition, Stephen tells of the paralytic condition of Dubliners under the domination of both the Catholic Church and the British Empire in a story entitled "A Pisgah Sight of Palestine" or "The Parable of the Plums" (U:7.1057-58) to the journalists of his acquaintance in order to confront himself. Having returned to Ireland from Paris a few months previously, in *Ulysses* Stephen realizes himself as an Icarus with the result that he must once again construct his identity as an artist.

Stephen's aspiration culminates in his Shakespearian theory in the National Library. Reading Shakespeare's works from the perspective of *Hamlet*, Stephen associates King Hamlet betrayed by Gertrude with Shakespeare cuckolded by his wife. Needless to say, Stephen's theory not only perplexes his listeners, but also antagonizes them against him. Even in Ireland Shakespeare's works were read as a kind of canon in English literature. Nevertheless, for Stephen the image of Shakespeare as a cuckold represents not only Ireland itself intruded upon by Britain<sup>2)</sup>, but it also identifies Stephen's own condition as an Irish artist. Stephen is traumatized just like Shakespeare. Shakespeare is a very mirror image reflecting Stephen's inner conflict.

However, we cannot find the conjunction between Shakespeare as a cuckold

and Stephen as an Irish artist. In this paper<sup>3)</sup> I will elucidate Stephen's obsession with his mother and the meaning of her as a ghost, while bearing in mind the similarities which can be drawn between Shakespeare and Stephen. For that purpose, I will first of all take up Stephen's mourning for his mother in spite of his renunciation of Christianity. Secondly, I will discuss the connection between Stephen and Shakespeare. Thirdly, I will examine Stephen's mother as representing national aspects. Thus I will conclude Stephen's farewell scene to Bloom in the Ithaca episode as indicating his final gesture to leave Ireland and to become an international artist like his author.

### **Stephen in Mourning**

Stephen's mother died a year before, but he is obsessed with her ghost that would destroy his identity as an artist even though he had declared in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*<sup>4)</sup> "I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it calls itself my home, my fatherland or my church" (P:251). Indeed, Stephen says to himself "Agenbite of inwit"(U:1.481) recalling his mother's deathbed, because he rejected his mother's wish that he pray for her soul. Thus he imagines his mother on her deathbed with abhorrance: "[h]er 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" (U:1.273-76).

Stephen feels guilty for not praying for her as she would have expected him to do so. His deeply-seated feeling of guilt for her thus presents as a kind of story in which the character has to deal with his imaginary crime. Stephen would always encounter the haunting and disabling images of his mother so long as he is guilt-paralyzed. In addition, Stephen must have inferred that his refusal to pray for

his mother had destroyed her. He did not say the words at her deathbed that would have helped her to die in peace, the prayer that she wanted to hear at any cost: "*Liliata rutilantium te confessorum turma circumdet: iubilantium te virginum chorus excipiat*"<sup>5)</sup> (U:1.276-77).

On the other hand, Stephen recalls his mother as a merciful figure protecting him from the world. Looking down at one of his weaker students whom he is teaching at a public school in the Nestor episode, Stephen overlaps his own past on to the student recalling his own nurturing mother: "Yet someone had loved him, borne him in her arms and in her heart. But for her the race of the world would have trampled him underfoot, a squashed boneless snail. She had loved his weak watery blood drained from her own" (U:2.140-42).

Stephen was a keen observer of his mother's ordinary life as is revealed in his memories of her. He once watched her enjoy a pantomime entitled "Turko the Terrible" (U:1.258) and once observed his mother's "shapely fingernails reddened by the blood of squashed lice from the children's shirts" (U:1.267-68). Stephen feels ashamed in that he "could not save her" (U:3.329-30), whereas he suffers from feelings of guilt for her. He cannot but help sympathizing with his mother who died at the age of 43 and who had borne "[f]ifteen children" (U:8.32).

Marylu Hill divides Stephen's image of his mother into the "real" and the "symbolic." The real mother is what Stephen wishes for while the symbolic mother is the object of Stephen's fears. In a sense, these two mothers are robbed of their subjecthood by Stephen's perception. Accordingly, Hill points out, "[o]nly by silencing and objectifying the mother can Stephen satisfy his infantile craving for oneness and his adult need" (Hill 329). Stephen apparently could not establish himself as an artist without repressing his mother's selfhood. Consequently, Stephen may project contradictory images on his mother.

In order to elucidate Stephen's relationship with his mother, we might exam-

ine a specific set of images he associates with her. For instance, the sea as a symbol plays an important role in *Ulysses*. Susan Stanford Friedman also comments on the dual function of the sea in *Ulysses*. She says: “[f]or Stephen, the sea images the dual aspect of his mother and his feelings for her. . . . She is the place of life and death, the site of origin and end. She is the body that is both pure and polluted . . . both desired and feared by the son” (Friedman 66). In fact, the sea surrounding the Martello Tower is pictured by Stephen as both “a great sweet mother” (U:1.77) and “a dull green mass of liquid . . . torn up from her[Stephen’s mother’s] rotting liver by fits of loud groaning vomiting” (U:1.107-10).

Stephen unconsciously internalized his mother as a hateful object which would either oblige him to obey or else would destroy him. Stephen’s refusal to succumb to the demolishing power is a matter of self-preservation. In order to save his life he has to confront her: “No mother. Let me be and let me live” (U:1.279). This self-assertive response to the internalized object is ambivalent: it can be read as the direct address of a desperate son to his mother to let him go, or it can be read as a statement which declares his freedom to do what he likes.

Stephen’s overwhelming feelings of remorse are expressed outwardly by his refusal to wear clothes that are not black. Mulligan cynically reminds Stephen of his sin, saying that “[h]e kills his mother but he can’t wear grey trousers” (U:1.122). We could not deny that Stephen’s mind is deeply obsessed by the feeling of sin. That is why in his imagination his mother comes to reproach him and she appears menacing to her son. We find an illustration of this in his dream: “[s]ilently, in a dream she had come to him after her death, her wasted body within its loose brown graveclothes giving off an odour of wax and rosewood, her breath, that had bent upon him, mute, reproachful, a faint odour of wetted ashes”(U:1.102).

Yet, whatever images Stephen would make up out of his mother, we could not accept them as borne only out of Stephen’s interior projections. Stephen

is horrified at his mother's grotesque image in the hallucinated Circe episode and murmurs "[t]hey say I killed you, mother. . . . Cancer did it, not I. Destiny" (U:15.4186-87). Stephen has to defend against the possibility that he did kill his mother. A passage of Joyce's letter to Nora after his mother's death testifies to the fact that Joyce's personal experience has been incorporated into fictional material:

My mother was slowly killed, I think, by my father's ill-treatment, by years of troubles, and by my cynical frankness of conduct. When I looked on her face as she lay in her coffin—a face grey and wasted with cancer—I understood that I was looking on the face of a victim and I cursed the system which had made her a victim (Ellmann 169, emphasis added).

In this connection we must explore Stephen's consciousness when he cries after recalling the dream about his mother: "Ghoul! Chewer of corpses!" (U:1.278). We tend to interpret these as Stephen's nominations for his mother, but this is not true. Even though her last wish was denied, Stephen's mother would not press her mouth as closely to her son as to a source of food. Rather, Stephen's mother is the victim of the "ghoul" or "chewer of corpses." Stephen's cry might be aimed at "the system" which victimized his mother absurdly. We must take note of the plural word "corpses" which connotes someone devouring corpses including his mother's own.

Stephen's mother might have died withering like "a twig burnt in the fire" (U:2.145). Her Gothic image is borne out of her actual deathbed scene, not from Stephen's imagination alone. Indeed, Mulligan once said to his aunt within Stephen's earshot that Stephen's mother was "beastly dead" (U:1.198). Stephen's mother was attended to by "Dr. Bob Kenny" (U:9.826) free of charge and in fact died of poverty suffering from malnutrition. If we take such family circumstances

into consideration, Stephen may also be a victim of the social institutions in Dublin. In the depth of it, Stephen's theory of Shakespeare has something to do with his mother's death.

### **Shakespeare as a Cuckold**

Stephen's theory of Shakespeare implies that Shakespeare's mind and personal experience deeply affected his whole work. Stephen argues that a genius makes out of his own image the standard of all experience. Thus referring to the autobiographical elements in *Hamlet*, Stephen supports the idea that the artist does not merely work out his own suffering by the therapy of words. The artist must also discover and reinvent the world by coming to terms with himself because "[w]e walk through ourselves, meeting robbers, ghosts, giants, old men, young men, wives, widows, brothers-in-love, but always meeting ourselves"(U:9.1044-46).

Therefore, walking through himself, Stephen necessarily meets a ghost, the ghost of his dead mother. It appears and speaks to him throughout the day. And the repeated appearances of his mother's ghost have an important function: they might provide Stephen with a clue to understanding his mission as an artist. Unlike the ghost of Hamlet's father, the ghost of Stephen's mother has no message to deliver, but she might be a messenger to remind him of the truths of his own life as Stephen secretly confesses "I wept alone" (U:9.224) when she died. Just as Shakespeare's wife overshadows all his works, so does Stephen's mother overshadow his life as an artist.

Certainly Stephen's mother's death is irrevocable and her absence is absolute. In the debate over *Hamlet*, Stephen defines a ghost as "[o]ne who has faded into impalpability through death, through absence" (U:9.987). But Stephen's mother, though "impalpable," is always present in his consciousness. Needless to say that it is not the mother who refuses to fade into impalpability, but it is Stephen

who brings the mother back time and again through memory and imagination. Stephen's mother corresponds with Shakespeare's wife, not because she had committed adultery like Anne Hathaway, but because she took the side of the Catholic Church regardless of her son's antipathy. In that sense, both Shakespeare's wife and Stephen's mother are seen as betrayers. The cuckolding of Shakespeare by Anne would serve to remind Stephen that his mother commits a form of adultery so long as she obeys the principles of the Catholic Church and effectively denies Stephen's identity.

Of course, in arguing the mystery of Shakespeare's works, Stephen clearly insists on the importance of the writer's role of fatherhood governing his works. As he associated himself with the old artificer Daedalus of Greek mythology at the end of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, he would like to explore his artistic fatherhood by having Shakespeare in mind:

Fatherhood, in the sense of conscious begetting, is unknown to man. It is a mystical estate, an apostolic succession, from only begetter to only begotten. On that mystery and not on the madonna which the cunning Italian intellect flung to the mob of Europe the church is founded and founded irremovably because founded, like the world, macro and microcosm, upon the void. Upon incertitude, upon unlikelihood. *Amor matris*, subjective and objective genitive, may be the only true thing in life. Paternity may be a legal fiction. (U:9.836-44)

However, Stephen intuits another fatherhood called God who unconsciously controlled Shakespeare from behind like a puppeteer. Thus, Stephen must necessarily broaden his artistic theory in order to emulate God and the doctrines of the Catholic Church. Stephen's mother desires that Stephen should submit to the



Catholic Church and now haunts him in the form of ghost before her disobeying son. However, as Stephen's mind wanders to thoughts of family relations and conflicts, he must forge the connection between the actual familial situation and the broader cultural context that frequently includes the Catholic Church which resulted in Stephen's mother dying a beastly death without purpose. That is why Stephen indicts God as the writer of this world:

The playwright who wrote the folio of this world and wrote it badly (He gave us light first and sun two days later), the lord of things as they are whom the most Roman of catholics call *dio boia*, hangman god, is doubtless all in all in all of us, ostler and butcher, and would be bawd and cuckold too but that in the economy of heaven, foretold by Hamlet, there are no more marriages, glorified man, an androgynous angel, being a wife unto himself. (U:9.1046-52)

So long as he sympathizes with his mother's death, Stephen could not but help challenging God. Stephen must emulate not only Shakespeare but also God. Just as Joyce transcends Stephen, Stephen also would like to transcend Shakespeare<sup>6</sup>). In this connection I would like to cite again the role of God called as "*dio boia*" or "hangman god" who wrote this world badly and became the target of Stephen's revenge. His identity is summarised as follows:

an omnivorous being which can masticate, deglute, digest and apparently pass through the ordinary channel with pluterperfect imperturbability such multifarious aliments as cancrenous females emaciated by parturition, corpulent professional gentlemen, not to speak of jaundiced politicians and chlorotic nuns, might possibly find gastric relief in an innocent collation of

staggering bob, reveals as nought else could and in a very unsavoury light the tendency above alluded to. (U:14.1286-93)

Stephen told Deasy that “[h]istory . . . is nightmare” (U:2.377), but says to himself it is “[n]ightmare from which you will never awake” (U:7.678). Though he listed “nationality, language, religion” as “nets” (P:207) which trap the Irish people, he alienated himself from them. However, after watching his mother's death, Stephen was forced to confront these nets. Therefore, he is no longer “[t]he artist” who, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails” (P:219). Consequently, he changes his theory of art and compares his artistic creation to the act of delivery:

In woman's womb word is made flesh but in the spirit of the maker all flesh that passes becomes the word that shall not pass away. This is the postcreation. *Omnis caro ad te veniet*. No question but her name is puissant who aventried the dear corpse of our Agenbuyer, Healer and Herd, our mighty mother and mother most venerable. . . (U:14.292-96)

### **Mother as a Nation**

The mother which Stephen comes to experience as a threat is not always the real mother but her social and institutional representations; she appears as the incarnation of Ireland and most of all of the Holy Mother Church. As C. L. Innes indicates (Innes 9-25), from around the mid-19th century, Irish nationalists invented feminine images such as Erin, Hibernia, Dark Rosaleen, or poor old woman, aspiring for an independent Ireland on the basis of the Catholic Church.

The ghost of Stephen's mother takes on such images in the hallucinated Circe

episode. The mother in this episode is a most threatening figures which has taken possession of Stephen's inner world. As a cultural symbol, she contains all the different aspects which have been projected in the earlier sections of *Ulysses*, but now Stephen feels most intensely her destructive power. Her mission is first of all to remind the son of his guilt and secondly to make him repent. Above all, Stephen's mother appears as a representative Irish woman, saying "[y]ears and years I loved you, O, my son, my firstborn, when you lay in my womb" (U:15.423-34). In Stephen's imagination this role of his mother has to be denied and destroyed as she appears as a vengeful ghost.

Thus, Stephen's mother demands him to repent, reminding him of her mercy: "[w]ho had pity for you when you were sad among the strangers?" (U:15.4196). But Stephen recognizes someone else behind mother and responds to her as [h]is noncorrosive sublimate! The corpsechewer!" (U:15.4314). As "his" in "his non-corrosive sublimate" would suggest, the someone else that controls his mother must be "*dio boia*" or "hangman god." Also, when his mother says "I was once the beautiful May Goulding. I am dead" (U:15.4173-74), Stephen responds "[w]hat bogeyman's trick is this?" (U:15.4176). It is evident that his mother is now pretending to be the "poor old woman" (U:1.403) in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* by W. B. Yeats. She is approaching Stephen as the very incarnation of Irish nationalism.

The play *Cathleen ni Houlihan* was presented in 1902 and had a great impact on many citizens in Dublin so that it was still fresh in the people's memory of those days. Patrick J. Keane argues for the importance of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* by Yeats in this way:

Yeats had given the theatregoers an Old Woman who elicited sympathy and gradually roused the blood; at the moment of incipient transformation, Maud Gonne, under Yeats's direction, presented them, for an instant, with a woman

for whom they would willingly die, to give "all." The men in the audience knew what beauty, mythological and actual, was concealed by Maud Gonne's makeup and rags. Thus "Patriotism was invested with all the excitement of a sexual seduction so safely decent that not even the most respectable guardian of the Irish image could impute sinister or scandalous motives to it" (Keane 12)<sup>7</sup>.

In addition, in Stephen's imagination his mother appears as a vengeful ghost, identifying herself with Christ: "Have mercy on Stephen, Lord, for my sake! Inexpressible was my anguish when expiring with love, grief and agony on Mount Calvary" (U:15.4238-40). Needless to say, Stephen intuits something imperative and cries "Nothung!"<sup>8</sup>) (U:15.4242) and strikes the chandelier with his ashplant stick. He has at last violated the internalized image. Her ghost as Christ is no different from any poor old woman putting importance on self-sacrifice instead of living a happy life.

Stephen then comes across two English privates and he insults them: "[y]ou are my guests. Uninvited. By virtue of the fifth of George and seventh of Edward. History to blame. Fabled by mothers of memory" (U:15.4370-71). On the other hand, he opposes the mob as "[t]he old sow that eats her farrow!" (U:15.4582-83). Stephen knows well that people are infected by the ideologies of the British Empire and the Catholic Church. Before quarreling he taps his brow and says to the two English privates "But in here it is I must kill the priest and the king" (U:15.4436-37). They mistake his gesture as suggesting his plan of assassinating their own king, but Stephen is simply suggesting the idea that nationalism is only an ideologically constructed fiction just like the principles of the Catholic Church. He would like to dispel such internalized fiction.

In the hallucinated Circe episode, we cannot be sure of what is really happen-

ing, much less of how Stephen reacts to his mother as a ghost. In describing the characters in this episode, Joyce might have broken down subject boundaries to show that our notions of clearly delineated subjects could be revised to comprise the insight that we all are born into a cultural context and become incorporated into a shared linguistic system. Stephen's mother in *Circe* also echoes Bloom's pen pal Martha Clifford's letter (U:5.245) when she says to Stephen, "I pray for you in my other world" (U:15.4205), and many of Bloom and Stephen's thoughts echo each other throughout the novel. Consequently, we cannot judge his real feeling of sin regarding his mother.

Stephen might still be paralyzed by the power of the Catholic Church at the end of the *Circe* episode. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Cranly emphasizes this point by saying to Stephen: "It is curious thing . . . how your mind is supersaturated with the religion in which you say you disbelieve" (P:251). So is the case of Stephen in *Ulysses*. More than anything else, it would be difficult for Joyce to arrive at a happy conclusion in a day. However, what is important is that Stephen does not silence his mother. He sincerely confronts the ghost of his mother even though he is antagonistic to her. As Mark Morrisson remarks, "[h]ere Stephen allows himself to understand what is missing from . . . the 'legal fiction' of paternity, is the mother" (Morrisson 349). In his struggle with the ghost of his mother, he might have come to recognize her subjecthood.

Stephen hears church bells on Bloom's yard and the echoes for him are again the hymn of the dead. He hears it as a death prayer just as in the *Telemachus* episode: "*Liliata rutilantium, Turma circumdet. Iubilantium te virginum. Chorus excipiat*"<sup>9)</sup> (U:17.1230-31). However, curiously enough, here Stephen does not bring back the memory of his mother and there is no ghost to threaten him. This fact tells us that Stephen has indeed come to grieve for his internalized dead mother and to show her mercy, even though we are not sure whether it was with the aid of

Leopold Bloom that he got out of his difficulties.

## Conclusion

While he is conversing with Bloom in the Eumaeus episode, Stephen announces: "You suspect . . . I may be important because I belong to the *faubourg Saint Patrice* called Ireland for short. . . . But I suspect . . . that Ireland must be important because it belongs to me" (U:16.1160-65). Hearing this announcement, not only Bloom but we readers also are surprised at Stephen's arrogance. However, Stephen realizes that people internalize national stories to identify with the nation, but such stories might function as "nets" to repress the subjecthood of the people. If this is the case, people must rewrite those national stories. That is the mission of the artist and Stephen's announcement is based on such a realization. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, James Joyce showed how essential it was for Stephen to make three refusals: to participate in Irish politics, to remain in his family, and to enter the priesthood.

Stephen is obsessed with the same problems even in *Ulysses*, but he is somewhat different from the character of his previous novel as his mother has died. Stephen would like to deny his mother and deny his own being as born out of physical parents. He would like to think of himself as created from nothing by the will of God. However, he knows that he cannot deny the physical bond with his mother just as he is connected with the long history of human kind. This idea forces him to struggle with his mother. Thus, he torments himself for not praying for his mother while he attempts to soothe her ghostly menaces in order to repent. We might assume that Stephen is paralytic in his struggle with his mother's ghost, but we ought not to forget that he is obsessed with the meaning of life as expressed through the dialogue with her. This is very important when we recall his declaration in his diary: "Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the re-

ality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race” (P:257).

Even though we cannot infer his intention, Joyce gave Molly Bloom her voice at the end of *Ulysses*. Her interior monologue is representative of her subjecthood. As I discussed above, Joyce transcends Stephen by far as an artist, but Stephen might write *écriture féminine* following his dialogue with his mother just as Joyce writes it through Molly. Here we might say that Joyce forced Stephen to struggle with his mother so that he may grasp her voice. This is the meaning of why Stephen’s mother appears as a ghost so many times in *Ulysses*.

## Notes

- 1) The quotations from the text of *Ulysses* are cited as U, followed by episode numbers and line numbers.
- 2) See David Lloyd’s *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and Post-Colonial Moment*, approaching adultery in Irish literature as colonial adulteration.
- 3) This paper is based on my manuscript which I read at the annual conference of the Japan-Ireland Society in 2010, which I have since completely revised and enlarged from the original in appreciation of much useful advice and input from participants.
- 4) The quotations from the text of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* are cited by P, followed by page numbers.
- 5) Gifford translates as follows: “May the glittering throng of confessors, bright as lilies, gather about you. May the glorious choir of virgins receive you” (Gifford 19).
- 6) In this paper, I do not take up William M. Schutte’s discussion comparing Stephen’s Shakespeare with Leopold Bloom which makes a mistake concerning the difference between the Elizabethan period and the modern one.
- 7) The quotations in this passage are from George Moore’s *Masks of Love and Death*.
- 8) “Nothung” is Siegfried’s sword and a source of power possessed by a father and eventually retrieved by a son in Wagner’s Ring Cycle. In this context Stephen is seen as a son aspiring to fatherhood.
- 9) In comparison with the prayer for the dying in the Telemachus episode, Gifford points out that “Stephen alters the meaning by leaving out the phrase *te confessorum* (you, of confessors) and by altering the punctuation: ‘Bright [glowing] as lilies. A throng gathers about. Jubilant you of virgins. Chorus rescues’” (Gifford 586).

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