Death and Mourning in Ulysses

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Death is present from the first pages of Ulysses, and will remain so, threaded, as it were, through the book. I cannot do justice to all that Joyce, via Ulysses, has to say about death, so will focus on two deaths and the mourning processes that follow. First, the reaction of Stephen - the fictionalised young Joyce- to the death of his mother. Second, the reaction of Leopold Bloom and his wife Molly to the death of their 11 day old son, Rudy, 11 years before the book is set.

Buck Mulligan, a close friend of Stephen, introduces death on page 4, when he says to Stephen: 'The aunt thinks you killed your mother. That's why she won't let me have anything to do with you.'

Let's look at the background to this terrible accusation. Joyce's mother died 10 months before Bloomsday, 16 June, 1904, the day on which Ulysses is set. Joyce returned to Dublin from Paris around Easter, April 1903, immediately he heard that his mother was dying. She was dying from liver disease, suffering gut-wrenching vomiting and liver failure in the months before her death. For four long months from April till August, Joyce observed the terrible suffering that preceded her death. Throughout these months he refused to do any of the religious observances she asked of him, and it is that refusal Mulligan is referring to when he says to Stephen 'The aunt thinks you killed your mother' etc.

We are immediately at the centre of Stephen's plight following his mother's death. Mulligan's words have plunged him into the guilt he

feels for refusing to do what his mother pleaded with him to do when he first returned - go to confession and take communion -the minimum of 'Easter duties' for adherent Catholics. Thereafter, he continued to refuse her entreaties to pray for her, even on her deathbed. It is this refusal that Mulligan's aunt and others suggest 'killed his mother'.

Stephen had turned against Catholicism - religion in general - late in his schooldays. To have done as his mother asked would, I suggest, represent a betrayal of Stephen's hard-won sense of identity and the values and beliefs attendant to that. Remember this is Catholic Ireland in 1904. Stephen's unbelief was hard-won. We have only to read 'Portrait of the Artist' to see that. He attended a Jesuit school, his mother was a devout Catholic, the pressures to remain adherent to Catholicism must have been enormous. So, having turned against Catholicism, to do what mother asked would represent a betrayal of his deepest self. But now, he is entrapped in grief and guilt about what he would not do.

Mulligan twists the knife (page 4): 'You could have knelt down Kinch when your dying mother asked you. …To think of your mother begging you with her last breath to kneel down and pray for her. And you refused. There is something sinister in you'.

Joyce writes: 'Pain that was not yet the pain of love fretted (Stephen's) heart. Silently in a dream she had come to him after her death, her wasted body within its loose graveclothes giving off the odour of wetted ashes.'… 'Her glazing eyes, staring out of death, to shake and bend my soul. On me alone. The ghost candle to light her agony… ..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'.

Stephen's guilt and desperate wish to be free of his dead mother's recriminations, is most powerfully expressed by that cry 'let me be and let me live'.

At this point, we need to consider what is involved in the process of mourning. While grief is the immediate reaction to loss, mourning is the process of working through the loss, the long and painful process of detaching ourselves from the person we have lost, hopefully towards eventual acceptance of the loss and, most importantly, re-engagement with life. Freud, and many since Freud, have talked about the mourning process as involving a going through all the memories and hopes involving the deceased and meeting each of them with the realization that the person is no longer alive. (Note P10 where Joyce alludes to this).This is hard enough when the relationship with the person who has died is mostly good, marked by more love than hate. But part of the work of mourning involves working through our negative feelings, including hatred, for that person. It is when significant ambivalence, frank dislike, or hatred has marked the relationship with the person who has died that problems arise. Sometimes these problems are evidenced by unresolved grief, and inability to really re-engage with life.

Let me pause there. Many people rile at the word hate. They don't want to admit to feeling any hate, especially not for someone they have loved, especially when that someone has just died. Yet, if we are honest with ourselves, ambivalence, involving feelings of love and hate, is present in every significant relationship in our lives. It is the balance between love and hate that matters. When the balance lies on the side of marked ambivalence or hate, mourning may be arrested, and the person can get stuck, as I said, in unresolved grief, or worse still, descend into melancholia.

I don't want to dwell on melancholia, because it is not part of either of the mourning processes we are considering today. For purposes of completion though, I will say that melancholia, the most severe of depressive illnesses, can occur when unconscious hatred for the person who has died is turned back on the self, and all the hatred, rage and criticisms once unconsciously directed at the dead person are directed to the person's own self.

Back to Stephen. He does not have melancholia. He has not turned his mother's recriminations back onto himself, he desperately wants to escape from them.

But his mourning process will be far from easy. He appears to lack any understanding from others of his conflicted feelings in relation to his mother. This lack of understanding is conveyed on pages 7 and 8. On the first day Stephen visited Mulligan after the death, Mulligan's mother asked who was in his room, to which Mulligan replied 'O, it's only Dedalus whose mother is beastly dead'. Stephen's pain in response to these words is misunderstood by Mulligan who assumes that Stephen has taken them as an offense to the memory of his mother. No doubt they are that, but worse and deeper, an offense to Stephen himself, inflicting, Joyce writes, a gaping wound in Stephen's heart. The wound involves Mulligan's total lack of empathy with Stephen's pain around his mother's death. Stephen has no doubt looked to Mulligan – a close friend- for understanding of why he did not do as mother asked, since Mulligan too is an unbeliever. He found no such understanding. Indeed Mulligan, representing everyman, says he would have done as Stephen's mother asked.

The work of mourning, apart from going over all the memories, hopes and feelings associated with the person who has died is

assisted by societal rituals surrounding death, the funeral, the wake, and so on. In addition to societal rituals, mourning requires other people, experienced as mourning with us. We do not then feel so alone in our pain. I hardly need to underline that Mulligan manifestly failed to mourn with Stephen, with the thoughtless, even cruel, remark that his mother was 'beastly dead'.

We are also helped to mourn when significant conscious and unconscious representations of important figures in our lives, our parents and others, even those who may be long dead, are felt to be mourning with us. Stephen has no such assistance from internal representations of his parents. His mother is experienced as haunting him for his failure to do what she asked, a ghastly, persecuting presence who returns in an even more malevolent way later in Ulysses. And Stephen's relationship with his father is hostile, so he has no help there.

What else can assist the mourning process? The arts – literature, poetry, painting, the theatre, cinema - can greatly assist mourning when the creator of the work of art represents something in their work with which we can identify. Their experience may not be the same as ours. Nevertheless there is something in the creation with which we resonate, and thus more fully experience our loss, while feeling that we are not alone in it. Darian Leader, a French psychoanalyst, writing about the mourning process, suggests that the arts exist to show us that 'creation can emerge from the turbulence of a human life'. Clinical experience suggests that often enough, it is through one of the creative arts that someone may feel able to connect with the deepest feelings relating to their grief.

Back to Stephen. We have seen how difficult his mourning process is because of the level of guilt he feels about not obeying his dying

mother's wishes, and because he has no one to understand his feelings. There is hope, though, that he will, in the end, be able to complete the work of mourning and integrate the love and hate for his mother. On page 33 he acknowledges that his mother has 'loved him, borne him in her arms and in her heart' and that without her the 'world would have trampled him under foot'. Later in the same paragraph he faces the reality of her death, with the words: 'She was no more. …She had saved him from being trampled underfoot and had gone, scarcely having lived'. He then likens himself to a fox, scraping at his mother's grave.

Here Stephen is actively doing the work of mourning - facing memories of his mother, the fact that she is dead, and feeling gratitude and love towards her, admixed with guilt and remorse for the wrongs he feels he has done her. It may be that the fox image refers to remorse about his rapaciousness around money, such that he did not hesitate to 'cry poor' to his generous hearted mother even when he knew how little money she had.

That facing his guilt and remorse will involve enormous fear and guilt is shown on pages 681, 682. Stephen, drunk and at a brothel, is dancing with some prostitutes. While he is whirling, disoriented, in the dance, his dead mother appears, ghoulish, her worn face without a nose, green with grave mould. She approaches Stephen, who chokes with fright, remorse and horror, and says: 'They said I killed you, mother…. Cancer did it, not I. Destiny'. She replies, talking about all she has done for him, ending with 'repent, Stephen'. 'The ghoul. Hyena!' shouts Stephen. Mother continues her urgings, approaching ever closer, until Stephen says 'non serviam' -Latin for 'I will not serve' and later, 'No no no. Break my spirit all of you, if you can. I'll bring you all to heel'. Mother asks God's mercy on Stephen.

And he raises his ashplant and breaks the chandelier, which unleashes pandemonium.

This disturbing passage captures more vividly than any other in the book the terrible conflict Stephen feels between guilt for not granting his dying mother's wishes and the damage that would have done to his sense of self. We see in it the enormity of the struggle he is enduring, and, note, 'non serviam' are the words attributed to Satan that caused him to be banished from heaven.

We are left with a Stephen 10 months after his mother's death, bearing painfully unresolved guilt and grief. The work of mourning is far from done. Two things offer hope that the work will be completed in due course –tho' we cannot know how long this might take.

First, the words (p4): 'Pain that was not yet the pain of love fretted his heart…' The 'not yet' would suggest that Joyce is telling us that his alter-ego, Stephen, came to feel the pain of love and loss, ie. the eventual resolution of the mourning process.

Second is the passage on page 33, quoted earlier, where gratitude to his mother is poignantly admixed with remorse. Certainly it is not yet the pain of love, but we sense that love is there, albeit still smothered by guilt and other people's condemnation of his behaviour when his mother was dying.

With my psychiatrist's hat on, I am profoundly impressed by the emotional truth of Joyce's account of Stephen's mourning – emotional truth that can surely only have come from Joyce's own experience after his mother's death.

Rudy

Let us now turn to a very different mourning process, that of Leopold Bloom for his only son Rudy who died when 11 days old, 11 years earlier.

After 11 years is the mourning process fully resolved? Let's look at what Ulysses tells us.

Leopold and Molly's sexual relationship has been affected ever since Rudy's death. They have not had vaginal intercourse since, it seems out of fear (at least on Bloom's part) that another pregnancy would lead to another dead baby. We have seen (pages 119,120), that Bloom has taken unto himself the blame for whatever abnormality led to Rudy's death. This may of course represent guilt for feelings of ambivalence about the pregnancy, or the baby himself after the birth, although there is nothing to suggest this in the text.

Rudy's death is first mentioned on p 80. Bloom is reading a letter from his daughter, Milly, who turned fifteen the day before, ie on the 15th June 1904. Consider the tone of his musings. He recalls running for the midwife, Mrs. Thornton, the day Milly was born. 'Jolly old woman. Lots of babies she must have helped into the world. She knew from the first poor little Rudy wouldn't live. Well, God is good, sir. She knew at once. He would be 11 now if he had lived'. He moves on to reflect lovingly on Milly's letter. There seems on Bloom's part a quiet acceptance of Rudy's death in this passage.

Then to p. 110. Stephen's father has been complaining about Stephen being in with a low-down crowd. Bloom looks at Simon Dedalus' angry moustache and thinks how full he is of his son. Bloom reflects further: 'He is right. Something to hand on. If little Rudy had lived. See him grow up. Hear his voice in the house. Walking beside Molly in an Eton suit. My son. Me in his eyes. Strange feeling it would be.' Later in the same passage he says 'I

could have helped him on in life. I could. Make him independent' and so on.

There is here a sense of such longing - longing and regret that he doesn't have a son, together with loving fantasies about Rudy's growing up and how Bloom could have helped him on in life. Unresolved grief? Not unless we count the fear of having another child as evidence for that.

It well may involve unresolved grief, uncompleted mourning in parents who cannot face the idea of losing another child for fear that it too would die.

However, some would suggest that the loss of a child can never be fully mourned. There will always, as in Bloom's case, be pain around loss of all the hopes invested in that child. Perhaps a calmness of reflection on the loss is the best that can be achieved, together with an ability to get on- in due course- with living, and an ability to do that without damaging the lives of one's other children via overprotection, or investing them with all the hopes and expectations around the child who has died.

Let's look at what is hopeful in terms of resolution of Bloom's mourning for Rudy.

There are two suggestions in Ulysses that 11 years on, vaginal intercourse between Molly and Bloom might resume. (p 119, 120) After taking onto himself the blame that Rudy was not healthy enough to survive, Bloom says to himself 'Better luck next time.' The possibility of another son is mentioned again on p 367: '…No son. Rudy. Too late now. Or if not? If not? If still?'

Later that day, after Stephen breaks the chandelier in the brothel Bloom protects him from the prostitutes and then from the police

who threaten to arrest him in the ensuing chaos. Calm restored, (p702) he stands guard over the by now prone Stephen, when there appears against the wall a 'fairy boy of about 11, dressed in an Eton suit'. 'Rudy'! Bloom calls inaudibly.

It is clear that Bloom's fatherly protection of Stephen has involved an unconscious connection with Rudy, while also underlining Bloom's humanity and generosity of spirit. Perhaps his protection of Stephen involves an unconscious, even partly conscious, readiness to take up that role with a son of his own.

Is there some meaning to Joyce's making Rudy's death 11 years ago, when Rudy was 11 days old? I would suggest there is. I suspect that Joyce somehow knew that the unconscious mind, although said to be timeless, keeps an exact record of traumatic events in our lives. Evidence for this can be found in anniversary reactions after a death or traumatic event, when something may be enacted that represents the trauma, outside of the person's conscious awareness. In Bloom's case I wonder if there is some unconscious link between 11 days and 11 years. Does Joyce attribute to Bloom the idea that 11 years - one year for each day of Rudy's life - is sufficient penance, as it were, for the fault or flaw in himself that he believed led to Rudy's death? Such an idea is entirely possible in terms of human psychology.

And what about Molly? We do not know much about Molly's reaction to Rudy's death. On page 926, she exonerates herself of any fault in relation to Rudy's death with, with, referring to Bloom, '… was he not able to make one'

(ie a fine son like Stephen). And shortly afterwards she says: 'I knew well I'd never have another', although we are not told why she thinks that. Then 'I'm not going to think myself into the glooms about that any more' and moves on to other thoughts.

Yet, by the end of Molly's monologue she is remembering times of sexual desire and pleasure with Bloom, and the book ends with: 'I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes'

We may I think conclude that Molly is also ready to resume 'complete carnal intercourse, with ejaculation of semen within the natural female organ,' as Bloom (p869) refers to sexual acts that can lead to conception. We must also acknowledge that although Molly has blamed Bloom for the lack of full intercourse, we can be in no doubt that she was complicit. We have seen earlier in the book that she is fully capable of getting Bloom to comply with her sexual wishes. I would suggest that both of them have been joined in an unspoken agreement not to risk another child, and that both are now in unspoken agreement to take the risk. Dare I suggest that for both of them, something about the passage of 11 years, standing for the 11 days, is unconsciously at work? I would so dare, but others may prefer the more prosaic interpretation about time, and Molly's biological clock. In any case we might say that for Bloom and Molly, acceptance of the loss of Rudy and engagement with life in the present, ie the work of mourning, has been completed.

Again with my psychiatrist's hat on I am struck by the depth of Joyce's understanding of the human psyche- his knowledge and understanding of human reactions to death.

We have I think been rather besieged by the popular press surrounding grief and mourning which suggests a staging process for resolving the loss, through shock, denial, anger, depression to eventual acceptance of the death. The trouble with this formula is that it fails to address more complex responses to a death, responses

that may not conform at all to said formula, responses that lead to or involve a failure ever to complete a mourning process.

Perhaps the best texts about death, grief and mourning, appear not in the popular press, nor even in the fields of psychiatry and psychology, but in literature, in works such as Ulysses.

It is wonderful proof that it is in works by the greatest writers that the deepest truths are to be found.

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