

## Madness as Redemption in “Circe”

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### *Abstract*

The article explores the relationship between hallucination and forms of madness in the “Circe” episode of *Ulysses*. The author studies the function of madness in relation to the notions of guilt and sinfulness and as a means of atonement and salvation.

**Keywords:** madness, guilt, sinfulness, atonement, salvation, “Circe.”

In his schemata James Joyce identified the art of the “Circe” episode of *Ulysses* as “magic” and its *technic* as “hallucination.” Without a doubt, not only do both Bloom and Stephen spend the entire episode passing back and forth between dream-like visions and reality, but their hallucinations of each often fuse together, and the staged format of “Circe” allows even the objects of both protagonists’ subconscious to be heard, either in onomatopoeic exclamations or in actual coherent speech. In fact, the hallucinatory nature of the episode even spreads at times to the stage directions, which in some cases clearly represent Bloom’s consciousness rather than the third person narration typical of such directions. Joyce’s use of hallucination in this episode is by no means arbitrary but instead the visions of Bloom and Stephen act as a form of madness. In choosing the *technic* of hallucination in this

episode Joyce is free to employ the many different uses of madness that have been made in literature to delve into the psyche of its characters. Most importantly, Joyce's use of madness is ultimately one of an attempted vehicle for redemption from sin.

Hallucination has been defined as "any percept-like experience which (a) occurs in the absence of an appropriate stimulus, and (b) has the full force or impact of corresponding actual (real) perception, and (c) is not amenable to direct and voluntary control by the experiencer" (Slade and Bentall 23).

The nature of the artistic use of hallucination is to furnish the spectator with the truthful aspects of waking dreams in which man's erotic obsessions, his savagery, his demons and his utopian ideals pour out (Hellman 1). According to Feder, "the very contents of the delusions and hallucinations of both literary figures and actual persons express symbolically an inner transformation of the world experienced through the deprivation, anger, pain, and guilt that have become the emotional means of engagement with it" (26). Through their hallucinations in "Circe," Bloom and Stephen face their inner demons, the ghosts of their pasts, as well as their sometimes wildly idealized fantasies for the future.

The hallucinations of "Circe," therefore, do not occur in a vacuum but instead reflect the inner consciousness of Bloom and Stephen. One critic has stated regarding the hallucinations of this episode that "the bout with insanity may in fact be the deepest of the conflicts in „Circe,“ for in that chapter both Bloom and Stephen are provisionally psychotic" (Shechner 119). Although neither Bloom nor Stephen exhibits signs of marked insanity in the other episodes of *Ulysses*, the hallucinations of each function here in the same way as the delusions of the mentally ill and constitute, as such, a form of madness. As Sigmund Freud has pointed out, hallucinations constitute a process of regaining memories long repressed in the unconscious, and he refers to this process in Shakespearian terms as a sort of "method in madness" (Freud 13:267-68).

In order to examine the uses of madness in literature in general and in *Ulysses* in particular, it is necessary first to determine the scope and boundaries of the term “madness.” By no means a scientific or psychoanalytic term, madness has been characterized as “an imprecise, non-medical term for a variety of abnormal mental states” (Yalom 7). Even the American Psychiatric Association in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)* has been unable and unwilling to attempt a precise definition for the concept of “mental disorder.”

Nevertheless, for purposes of this study, the definition offered by Lillian Feder in *Madness and Literature* will be helpful in focusing our attention on a certain type of mental disorder that is exemplified, in general, by a loss of control over the powers of conscious rational thought. According to Feder, madness is “a state in which unconscious processes predominate over conscious ones to the extent that they control them and determine perceptions of and responses to experience that, judged by prevailing standards of logical thought and relevant emotion, are confused and inappropriate” (5). Clearly, Bloom’s and Stephen’s often wildly comical visions, in which not only their dead relatives come to life before their eyes but all sorts of inanimate objects do as well, constitute extended instances in which unconscious processes predominate over conscious ones.

The presence of madness in literature is, by no means, a Joycean innovation, but instead extends back all the way to the classical era and beyond. Euripides’s Cassandra, Sophocles’s Ajax, Shakespeare’s Lear, and Cervantes’s Don Quixote are among the countless literary characters whose insanity plays a pivotal role in the work with which they are associated. Among the many ways in which madness has been employed as a literary theme is the possibility of finding reason in the unreason of delusion, madness as an expression of pathological guilt, and the often close relationship between madness and the creative process itself. The “Circe” episode explores all three of these common uses of madness but ultimately concentrates

on the idea of madness not only as caused by the guilt of sinfulness but as a means of atonement and salvation from sin.

As for the relationship between madness and the creative process, in Plato's *Phaedrus* Socrates asserts that madness is so closely linked to the creative process that literature is worthless without it, "He who without the divine madness comes to the doors of the Muses, confident that he will be a good poet by art, meets with no success, and the poetry of the sane man vanishes into nothingness before that of the inspired madmen" (245a). Joyce, in employing hallucination not merely as an content element of the "Circe" episode but as its technique, is playing the part of Socrates' inspired madman, drawing on his own subconscious for the purposes of artistic creation.

In fact, in a 1909 letter to Nora Joyce admitted to masochistic urges which reflect the pleasure Bloom seems to derive from his abuse in "Circe." In the above-mentioned letter, Joyce wrote to Nora, "tonight I have an idea madder than usual. I feel I would like to be flogged by you...I wonder is there some madness in me...?" (O'Brien 177-8). In this way, Joyce projected his own masochistic tendencies onto Bloom, his literary creation, and explored them through Bloom's hallucinations, which are in essence nothing more than Joyce's artistic creations. Joyce's use of hallucination as a technique means that "Circe" is not merely about Bloom's and Stephen's hallucinations, but that when these visions are taking place, the text actually becomes the hallucination in that even the stage directions reflect the dream-like inner consciousness of one or both of the main characters.

Joyce's use of hallucination in "Circe" also reflects the surrealist project of using hallucination and vision to explore the subconscious. In his *Manifesto of Surrealism* Breton defined the movement as: "psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express –verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner– the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by the thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic

or moral concern” (Breton, quoted in Waldberg 75). The purpose of the surrealists was, therefore, to derive truth and reason from the automatic and unreasoned recesses of the mind. Just as the surrealists used their own visions and hallucinations to portray the mysteries of the subconscious, Joyce uses Bloom’s and Stephen’s hallucinations to delve deeper into their true natures.

The surrealists, however, are by no means the only ones to have attempted to derive reason from unreason by way of artistic creation. It is important to note the paradoxical relationship that madness has often had with reason throughout the history of literature. Insane characters, which should by definition be devoid of reason, often seem to be capable of more reasoned thought than those who are sane. In this way King Lear, for example, is able to see the error of his ways in favoring Regan and Goneril over Cordelia only after succumbing to his delusions. According to Feder, this apparent reason in madness is used in literature to show how the breakdown of social and personal inhibitions caused by mental derangement can sometimes illuminate the hypocrisies present in the madman’s own psyche as well as in his social environment (98). Foucault identifies this ability to reach reason through madness as a sort of paradox in which madness is made up of two contradictory layers. “Under the chaotic and manifest delirium reigns the order of a secret delirium. In this second delirium, which is, in a sense, pure reason, reason delivered of all the external tinsel of dementia, is located the paradoxical truth of madness” (Foucault 97). The paradox described by Foucault reveals madness as a gateway to truth.

In his hallucinations Bloom confronts the truths of his distant as well as his recent past. At first he denies over and over again the accusations weighed against him by the assortment of women who all claim to have received unwelcome or inappropriate advances by him. In answer to Gerty MacDowell’s angry claim that Bloom is responsible for her bloody clout, in other words, her loss of innocence, Bloom coldly responds, “You’re dreaming. I never saw you” (442).

When Martha Clifford accuses Bloom of being a heartless flirt he merely tells the First and Second Watch, "she's drunk. The woman is inebriated" (457). Bloom also pleads not guilty, albeit in a long tirade of incoherence, to the charges of unwelcome advances that Mary Driscoll makes against him (461). Nevertheless, after being "unmanned" by Bella/Bello Cohen, Bloom is finally able to admit the truth, "I have sinned!" (544).

Bloom's bouts of temporary insanity allow him not only to recognize his guilt for having sinned but ultimately to atone for it as well. This idea of madness being able to bring about an expiation of guilt is rooted in the work of Plato. In the *Phaedrus* Socrates states that, "when diseases and the greatest troubles have been visited upon certain families through some ancient guilt, madness has entered in and by oracular power has found a way of release for those in need (Plato 244e). In this way, just as the Muses bring madness to the poets in the form of divine inspiration, the gods give madness to those suffering from guilt in order to offer them release.

Bloom's ultimate release comes in his final hallucination, in which, having safely removed Stephen from Nighttown, he sees a vision of his dead son Rudy. "Bloom experiences a metempsychotic *epopteia* as he perceives a vision of the many-faceted divine son in the form of Rudy, his dead child, clothed in the vestments of Hermes, Jesus, a fairy boy.... Bloom, having recovered his lost "son" from Hades both in the person of Stephen and in this vision of Rudy, has surfaced through the ivory gate that leads out of the underworld" (Brammer 117-18). It is also important to note that in Bloom's final vision Rudy is holding a book in his hand and reading it from right to left. This image of his son reading backwards indicates that Bloom not only sees Rudy in Stephen, but he also sees Rudy as a reflection of himself, as if he were gazing into a mirror. In this way, in Bloom's escape from Nighttown, he manages to save not only Stephen and Rudy but himself as well.

Having seen briefly the different uses that Joyce makes of madness in “Circe,” we will now to delve even deeper into the last of these, the relationship between madness, guilt, and sin and the use of madness as a road to redemption in *Ulysses*. In order to do so, it is necessary to first explore the possible causes of Bloom’s madness in “Circe.” While Stephen’s hallucinations can be easily explained by his overindulgence in absinthe in the preceding episode, the reasons behind Bloom’s visions are somewhat more difficult to find. According to one critic, the clinical explanation for Bloom’s hallucinations is congenital epilepsy (Gordon 7). It is true that Bloom’s grandfather is described as epileptic, the stage directions at one point have Bloom emitting a “piercing epileptic cry” (531), and, as Gordon points out, Bloom’s visions are often preceded by his gazing off into the distance. Nevertheless, Dr. Mulligan, in his diagnosis of Bloom, states that hereditary epilepsy is present, also refers to Bloom as Dr. and claims that he has recently escaped from an asylum for demented gentlemen (493), a statement uncorroborated by any other evidence in the text. This is not to say that epilepsy is not, in fact, behind Bloom’s hallucinations, but it indicates that other, though not necessarily contradictory, explanations must be explored as well. While epilepsy may well be the medical cause of Bloom’s visions in “Circe,” this diagnosis does little to explain why Joyce chose to give Bloom these epileptic attacks only during the Nighttown episode of *Ulysses* but nowhere else in the novel.

According to Lillian Felman, author of *Writing and Madness*, madness can only occur “within a world in conflict, within a conflict of thoughts” (Felman 206). Clearly, even if epilepsy can be said to be the trigger for Bloom’s hallucinations, the conflict of thoughts behind the onset of these visions is found in his feelings of guilt for past transgressions. “The first „hallucination“..., Bloom’s encounter with Virag, Molly, and Mrs. Breen, after entering Nighttown, is readily psychologised as a projection of Bloom’s guilt feelings” (Hampson 151). It is no accident, then, that Bloom’s

first hallucination begins just as he passes through the entrance to Nighttown, the red light district of Dublin, which is dubbed "the haunts of sin" by Mrs. Breen (443).

When he first appears in the episode Bloom appears to be perfectly lucid, but as he approaches O'Beirne's wall he begins to feel a "bit light in the head," a feeling he terms "brainfog" (436). When he asks a dark sinister figure leaning against the wall for the name of the street where they are standing, the figure answers in Irish "*Sraid Mabbot*" (436), indicating that they are on Mabbot Street, the very place identified as the entrance to Nighttown in the stage directions of the first lines of "Circe" (429).

It is no accident that this sinister figure is described as "injected with dark mercury" (436) and later in the episode given the name "The Dark Mercury" (456). Paralleling Ulysses' encounter with Hermes as he approaches the house of Circe, Bloom encounters Hermes' Roman alter-ego, Mercury, at the entrance to Nighttown. While in Greek and Roman mythology Hermes-Mercury is known as the messenger god, in astrology Mercury is said to rule the conscious, reasoning mind. According to Gifford's *Ulysses Annotated*, this "Dark Mercury" in Circe, therefore, signifies "widespread infection (venereal), wisdom associated with devil worship, and evil counsel and betrayal" (Gifford 456). Clearly, however, if Mercury is said to rule reason, then this Dark Mercury is also a sign of dark reason, or unreason, and therefore madness.

In a final argument that Bloom's hallucinations stem from his guilt over his sins of the past, many parallels have been made between the "Circe" episode of *Ulysses* and the Flaubert's *Temptation of St. Anthony*, in which the Saint is tempted to sin in a series of hallucinations. Molly Bloom, when she appears in Turkish costume in Bloom's visions, is dressed in a way that evokes Flaubert's Queen of Sheba who tries to tempt St. Anthony to lust after her body and her riches (Gilbert 301). This clear allusion to Flaubert's work reinforces the idea that the hallucinations in "Circe" appear in order to explore the concepts of temptation and sin in Bloom's subconscious.



Nevertheless, while St. Anthony is tempted by sins that he has not yet indulged in, Bloom is confronted with his “sins of the past” (537).

Through his encounters with his sins and temptations of the past in his hallucinations, Bloom is reliving his fall into sin. In her book, *Whom Gods Destroy: Elements of Greek and Tragic Madness*, Ruth Padel states that “madness is also the perfect image of the tragic „fall“...Madness is the inward correlative of external „fall“” (241-42). In fact, the Fall of Man was one of the most important themes in Joyce’s work (Tolomeo 301). His brother Stanislaus declared that the importance of this concept for Joyce was that “through the Fall the soul is awakened to spiritual life by sinning” (Tolomeo 301). In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in fact, “Joyce describes the artist undertaking a willful descent into earthly sin in order to develop the experience necessary for artistic creation and regeneration” (Brammer 92). In *Ulysses* Joyce equates the fall into sin with the fall into madness, and through the course of “Circe,” Bloom manages to achieve salvation from both of these states.

While the religious concept of the fall refers to Adam and Eve’s (and therefore mankind’s) fall into original sin, Bloom spends all of *Ulysses* falling over and over again into the sins of his past. As Tolomeo points out, Bloom is rather obsessed with the law of falling bodies which is measured mathematically at thirty-two feet per second. “The scientific law is used to invoke the theological associations of the „falling“: the bodies which „fall to the ground“ provide an emblem for the fallen nature of mankind” (Tolomeo 303).

Each time number thirty-two appears in the text (a total of twelve, five of which are found in the “Circe” episode) is a subtle reference to the idea of The Fall.

Although Bloom is very concerned with the idea of falling, it is clear that when Bloom first appears in *Ulysses* he has already fallen. “While in the *Portrait* Joyce describes Stephen’s vivid experiences in a way which can be considered a recreation of man’s fall, he presents us in *Ulysses* with the

already fallen universe of Leopold Bloom" (Tolomeo 301). His encounter with the sins of his past are constant reminders throughout "Circe" that Bloom has already given into the temptation of sin. In fact, Bloom has a scar on his hand from a fall he had at the age of sixteen (563). While no specific reference is made, the reader can assume that this scar also symbolizes Bloom's first fall into sin. Through his madness, though, Bloom relives the sins that led to his fall from grace until he is finally able to admit them.

According to Tolomeo, the "Nausicaa" episode "provides a microcosmic parallel to man's original temptation and seduction by woman" (308). The "Circe" episode takes this idea further by equating man's fall from grace through original sin both with Circe's turning men into swine as well as the many assorted fallen women turning Bloom into a sinner. Just as Adam was made a sinner and fell from grace through giving into the temptation to sin offered by Eve, Ulysses' men were tempted by Circe's offer of a bountiful feast and were subsequently turned into swine. Furthermore, Circe-Eve, as temptress, is also equated with the prostitutes of Nighttown and the many fallen women in "Circe" who appeal to Bloom's lust either in the present or in the hallucinated past. As it was established above that having given in to the temptations to indulge in lustful acts is part of the cause of Bloom's madness in "Circe," the full equation can be made whereby Eve-temptation/Circe/prostitute-temptress turns men into sinners/swine/madmen.

Therefore, every porcine reference in "Circe" is a subtle allusion to man's (and Bloom's in particular) fallen condition. The Artane Orphans taunt Bloom by singing "You hig, you hog, you dirty dog! You think the ladies love you!" (497). At another point the stage directions have Bloom "leading a black boagoak pig by a sugaun" (499). Lipoti Virag, Bloom's grandfather, who is described by Shechner as one of Bloom's alter egos, speaks to his grandson "in a pig's whisper" (515).

When Bloom first appears in the episode he is struck by seeing his own image in a mirror and gazes into the reflection of his

own “bonham eyes” (434). As “Bonham,” in fact, is another term for a young pig, Bloom is already early in the episode portrayed as a pig even before meeting Bella Cohen. Later in the episode Bloom admits in three different ways that he has sinned. First, in the most straightforward manner, “I have sinned” (544), next, in keeping with the Circe theme of the episode, “I have been a perfect pig” (551), and finally in Latin, “*Peccavi*” (551). Clearly, all three of these declarations are synonymous and both constitute Bloom’s admission that he is already a fallen man and reinforce that the porcine condition is identified with a fall from grace.

Nevertheless, while Bloom responds to Zoe when she catches him from falling upstairs, “the just man falls seven times” (501), Gifford, in his *Ulysses Annotated*, gives the complete proverb Bloom is alluding to as, “the just man falls seven times, and riseth up again” from Proverbs 24:16 (486).

Another version of this proverb which may be slightly more fitting for *Ulysses* is “the just man falls seven times a day,” which is the way many people incorrectly quote this proverb. In keeping with this incorrect version of the proverb, it makes sense for Bloom to relive his fall into sin over and over again throughout the episode. In any case, it is important to remember that the just man also rises up again.

Bloom also, by way of his hallucinations, is able to confront, recognize, and overcome his sins of the past. Ultimately, he atones for his sins by saving Stephen-Rudy, and himself from the temptations of Nighttown. Just as Odysseus faces the temptations of Circe in order to save his men from their porcine condition, Bloom faces his past in order to finally save his real son, his newly-adopted son, and himself.

Recalling that Bloom’s first act in “Circe” is to gaze into the eyes of his pig-like reflection and that his final hallucination of Rudy actually represents a mirror image of Bloom himself, it is clear that through the course of “Circe” Bloom undergoes a transformation from a state of sin, symbolized by his pigness, to one of innocence, represented by his identification with his dead son Rudy. Bloom’s madness, therefore, is not only caused

by his guilt over his sins but is also a key element of his recovery from sin.

As quoted above, Foucault speaks of "the paradoxical truth of madness" to refer to its ability to exhibit reason in a realm of unreason. Freud, on the other hand, speaks of another paradoxical characteristic of madness. According to Freud, "the delusional formation, which we take to be the pathological product, is in reality an attempt at recovery, a process of reconstruction" (Freud 12:16-18). R.D. Laing shares this view in stating that madness is actually an indication that the patient is already in the process of a cure (McNerney 270). Marsanne Brammer traces Bloom's steps through Nighttown as thresholds in a sort of rite of initiation. The seven thresholds Brammer identifies in "Circe" can be compared to the seven times the just man sins before he rises up again. Bloom's journey through and out of Nighttown reflects man's fall and atonement for sin. "Bloom's passage through the seven thresholds of „Circe“ enacts this simultaneous fall and ascent: the „fall upstairs“ that in Joyce's mysteries confers illumination" (Brammer 93).

In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which, like the "Circe" episode, explores the ideas of temptation, sin, and atonement, madness is also associated with both fall and recovery. The term "madness" is used only twice in *A Portrait*, the first time associated with the fall into sin and the second with the recovery from sin. After realizing the full effect of his sins in Nighttown, Stephen "cowered in the shadow of the thought, abasing himself in the awe of God Who had made all things and all men. Madness. Who could think such a thought?" (*Portrait* 122). Later, in an awakening of both body and soul, "a spirit filled him, pure as the purest water, sweet as dew, moving as music. But how faintly it was inbreathed, how passionlessly, as if the seraphim themselves were breathing upon him! His soul was waking slowly, fearing to awake wholly. It was that windless hour of dawn when madness wakes and strange plants open to the light and the moth flies forth silently" (*Portrait* 192). This use of the term madness to

describe both the fall and the new-found self-discovery of the soul is in keeping with the statement that “*Ulysses* is a fulfillment of the pattern of original sin begun in the *Portrait* in which „the fall into sin, at first a terror, gradually becomes an essential part of the discovery of self and life”” (Tolomeo 301, quoting Ellmann).

According to Gilbert, in Bloom’s final hallucination he redeems himself because of the tragic beauty of his vision of Rudy which contrasts with the erotic and perverse nature of his earlier hallucinations. In fact, though, Bloom’s redemption at the end of “Circe” is of a different sort. In saving Stephen from the perils and temptations of Nighttown, Bloom not only recuperates his lost son but saves himself as well. The hallucinations of the “Circe” episode act as a sort of madness in which Bloom confronts the truth about his guilt for the sins of his past, admits them in a manner of confession, and ultimately redeems himself by extricating not only himself, but Stephen as well, from the new temptations of Nighttown. During “Circe” Bloom is presented as three versions of the same: madman, sinner, and pig. When he leaves Nighttown, though, Bloom is once again sane, he has atoned for his guilt, and has saved both himself and Stephen from the enchantments of Circe.

It is no surprise that Stephen enters Nighttown shouting chants that are used to begin mass as the madness of the “Circe” episode reflects a sort of religious process, whereby Bloom, through his series of hallucinations manages to find salvation from his sins. The use of madness in “Circe,” therefore, is by no means accidental or anecdotal but instead plays an important role in Joyce’s overall project both in “Circe” as well as in *Ulysses* as a whole.

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