

# The Ethical Reader in *Ulysses*

## El lector de Ética en *Ulises*

**Stephen W. Gilbert**

Departamento de Letras Hispánicas  
Universidad de Guadalajara  
(México)  
s3gilbert5@yahoo.com

**Recibido:** 15/03/2016

**Revisado:** 15/03/2016

**Aprobado:** 24/04/2016

### RESUMEN

Una teoría de la ironía propone que el entendimiento simultáneo de lo dicho y lo no-dicho es característica de tanto la ironía textual como la ironía verbal. Juntar esta teoría con unos conceptos de la estética de la recepción nos da una descripción de la lectura ética de un momento en *Ulises* de James Joyce.

**Palabras clave:** James Joyce, *Ulysses*, teorías de la ironía, respuesta del lector, teoría de la recepción.

### ABSTRACT

One theory of irony proposes that the simultaneous apprehension of the said and the unsaid is a characteristic of both verbal and textual irony. Joining this theory of irony with certain concepts from reception theory, produces a description of an ethical reading of one moment in James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

**Keywords:** James Joyce, *Ulysses*, theories of irony, reader response, reception theory.

Any reader of *Ulysses* has experienced a series of changing attitudes towards events in the text as he reads for a second time. The experience of a "second reading" is various, of course. The purpose of this paper is to examine closely, using one particular event of the text, the kinds of changes that a reader goes through as

he becomes increasingly aware of what exactly is happening in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Irony, as experienced by readers of novels, offers an interesting point of departure.

Theories of irony, as they have become increasingly more revealing of all aspects of literary texts, will prove useful not only for recognition of local instances of irony, as well as general or universal ironizing intentions of an author, but can be combined with theories of reader response as part of a study of how a reader proceeds from one understanding of the text to another understanding. The aspects of theories of irony that will be most useful to this study involve the difference between what is said (or "meant" in some traditions) and what is unsaid (or "significant"). Even theories of verbal irony (largely the province of linguistics and philosophy of language) begin with the distinction between text and interpreted meaning. More specifically, many earlier theories of verbal irony (see Muecke for examples) depend on the interpretation of relations between two propositions, as in the classical definition of irony as anaphrasis, that is, saying one thing and meaning the opposite: "*Some critics have even said that irony is finally negative, so evident is it that the first step in reading it is a resounding "no" and a pulling back [a "distancing" of the reader from the text] to discover some possible way of making sense that can replace the rejected nonsense*" (Booth, 24).

What these theories have in common, but is not made explicit very often, is that the *unsaid* is necessarily, in all cases, reconstructed by the reader, or hearer in the case of verbal irony.

Wayne Booth speaks frequently of "ironic reconstruction," and the hermeneutic distinction between "meaning" and "significance." But he continually returns to the stabilizing notion of authorial intention: "*A decision must therefore be made about the author's knowledge or beliefs.... It is this decision about the*

*author's own beliefs that entwines the interpretation of stable ironies so inescapably in intentions"* (Booth, 11).

I am going to argue that what we reconstruct, particularly in the case of Joyce, is not so much the author's intentions or beliefs, but the author's knowledge. Joyce is extremely careful to give us the knowledge necessary for a complete reading of the events in his novel, but that knowledge is rarely found where a reader of the traditional realist novel would normally look for it.

Theories of reader response enrich the discussion of ironic reconstruction. Roman Ingarden, in 1960 (*Das literarische Kunstwerk*, tr. 1973), proposed that the work of art is "concretised" by the reader, that the work always exists between two poles, one artistic, created by the author, and the other, esthetic, created by the reader. Wolfgang Iser describes it this way: "From this polarity it follows that the literary work cannot be completely identical with the text, or with the realization of the text, but in fact must lie halfway between the two" (Ingarden, 1974, 50). The realization of the text, achieved by the process of concretization, is remarkably similar to the process of the discovery, or creation, by the reader, of a text's "significance" which Booth incorporates into his theory of irony.

Booth claims that we determine the degree of stability (following his categories of overt/covert and stable/unstable ironies) by establishing "*how much reason the reader has for thinking his immediate task completed once an asserted irony has been understood or a covert irony has been reconstructed*" (Ingarden, 234). Interestingly, the work we do in our example from *Ulysses* is done in stages. We reconstruct a covert irony by realizing (later) that the Boylan who sends the card in the morning is the Boylan who will pass an adulterous afternoon with Molly. Then, retrospectively, we reconstruct Bloom's collection of the mail from the floor to include this information. But we have further work to do. We have to reconstruct Bloom's unsaid and under-described (preferable, I think, to the term covert)

reaction. The material realities surrounding the situation itself are only hinted at, and even then only later in the text, as we become increasingly, and incrementally, aware of Molly's plans for the day.

Hugh Kenner (1987) describes this as a kind of attention that Joyce gives to immediate experience. Perfectly aware of what his characters are doing and where they are at every minute of the day, Joyce is equally aware of what they are wearing or carrying in their pockets. And if he is writing the words that cross through their minds, he will not succumb, as many a lesser writer does, to the temptation to "sneak in" peripheral information that might be useful to a reader, but that would be unnatural for Bloom or Stephen to be thinking. (A self-description at the mirror, for instance). It is the experience of the character himself that Joyce captures, while supplying the information the reader needs, but not in the order readers have become used to.

Take a simple instance: Bloom, beginning his day's various errands and wanderings, "... crossed to the bright side, avoiding the loose cellarflap of number seventyfive. The sun was nearing the steeple of George's church. Be a warm day I fancy. Specially in these black clothes feel it more. Black conducts, reflects, (refracts, is it?), the heat. But I couldn't go in that light suit. Make a picnic of it." (Kenner, 77)

The reader doesn't know that Bloom is to attend a funeral later in the morning. And nothing in the passage just cited would necessarily imply a funeral. The reader does know that Bloom is wearing black. And that he is going somewhere, and that a black suit is appropriate, and that it is not a festive occasion. But there is nothing in the passage that is not recognizably Bloom thinking.

The instance I would like to examine in some detail occurs earlier in the same chapter. We have observed Mr. Bloom preparing breakfast for his wife, he has gone

to the butcher's for a kidney, and on his return home finds the mail on the floor inside the front door.

*"Two letters and a card lay on the hallfloor. He stooped and gathered them. Mrs Marion Bloom. His quick heart slowed at once. Bold hand. Mrs Marion."*

What the reader doesn't know about these letters is almost everything. All we may deduce at this point is that at least one of the letters is addressed to "Mrs Marion Bloom" that the writing on the envelope is in a "bold hand" and that Bloom reacts strongly (and rather oddly, it seems. Why should his heart slow?)

I am going to propose that an interesting reading of *Ulysses* results from certain experiments with theories of irony and reader response theories. The two theories have a great deal in common.

Now, what is happening in *Ulysses*? The history of Joyce criticism is instructive. For the first forty years or so, the criticism was predominantly concerned with exegesis. A great deal of effort was exerted in the exploration of parallels with Homer's *Odysseus* (authorized by Joyce's collaboration with Stuart Gilbert.) And then later, of course, we had to learn how to read the words that were actually on the page. Thom's Dublin directory for 1904 was a basic tool. Maps were consulted, and the wanderings of various characters were plotted against Dublin streets and landmarks. But quickly readers began to realize that the reconstruction of the city of Dublin, the construction of timetables and the cross-referencing of locations and activities of various characters constituted a kind of reading that we hadn't had much experience with in earlier novels. The realization that Stephen and Bloom observe the same cloud in the sky at the same time of day came as a result of multiple readings by multiple readers. The recognition that one of the early morning swimmers, dressing after bathing at the men's beach near Martello tower, is in fact a priest (this is not confirmed until a few chapters later) strengthens the reading of the first chapter as containing elements of a black mass.

A general conviction began to grow among careful readers of *Ulysses* that a great deal of what is important in the novel is either unsaid, or revealed indirectly, almost accidentally, in other parts of the novel. The information that a reader needs to concretise the esthetic object is not where we normally find it. And, according to Ingarden, and later Wolfgang Iser, it is regularly information that has to be placed in conjunction with the artistic creation, that is, the text, in order for the esthetic object even to come into existence.

Does this mean that the novel we read, when we read without the displaced or the unsaid is something other than the esthetic object we create once we have access to the (absent) information which it is necessary to place in conjunction with the text? It seems that reading occurs in at least two stages, apprehension of the artistic object, followed by collaboration in the creation of the aesthetic object. I am going to propose, that at least in one example from *Ulysses*, that there is a third stage of reading: the creation of an ethical reader.

The observations of Iser and Ingarden dwell on the immediate dualities between reader and text: what the reader normally, almost intuitively does with what Iser calls “apparently trivial scenes.” He brings into play the “unwritten aspects” and the “unspoken dialogue” of these scenes to explain how the reader is drawn into the action, and becomes an active participant in the arena of imagination outlined or gestured towards by the author. The reader completes the outlines indicated by the author, supplying such mundane details as the color of a character’s clothes, his physical posture, surrounding furniture, where these details are not “filled out” by the author. And these details in turn become a more or less permanent part of the text. Thus begins a dynamic process between limits imposed by the text on its “unwritten implications” (Iser, 51).

It is against such a background that the examination of Bloom’s collection of the day’s mail begins to reveal not only a depth of meaning, as a momentous part

of the day, but also an indication of the kinds of reading strategy that are called for by Joyce's control of the text.

For this is no ordinary phenomenological reading, described by Iser and Ingarden as they build a theory that will reveal the reader's relation to any fictional narrative whatsoever. *Ulysses* is arguably one of the most completely controlled texts of the twentieth century. Joyce is able to speak of the artist as one who, like God, remains "*behind, or above or beyond his creation, paring his fingernails*" but he is able to adopt that posture only because of his supreme, even arrogant confidence that his reader has been given absolutely everything that is necessary to participate completely in the play of imagination, following the rules (if he wants the full value of the experience) that the artist has laid down. Thus talk of "clues" supplied by the author is much more common with writers like Joyce (there are others, Nabokov comes to mind) than with someone like Jane Austen or D.H. Lawrence, for instance.

We don't know until later. This is one of the most common strategies that Joyce employs in his careful arrangements and manipulations of information. We are able to read the novel, sort of, expecting that we are being given the necessary information in the kind of order that other novels habitually follow. And this is a most unsatisfactory reading, complained of by the early critics, calling the novel "obscure," or "fragmented". And "later" is sometimes later in the novel, and sometimes it refers to a second or even a third reading, often interrelated with recourse to secondary texts. (Joyce was well aware that in *Finnegans Wake* he was "*giving the professors something to puzzle over for generations*")

It is a peculiar kind of doubleness, compared to the doubleness we observe and make use of in the interpretations of irony. Usually, the reconstruction necessary to interpret irony is in immediate relation to the text, not delayed, but simultaneously present. Linda Hutcheon explores this kind of doubleness in persuasive terms in

*Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (Hutcheon, 1994). What she wants to consider is "what might occur if ironic meaning were seen to be constituted not necessarily only by an either/or substitution of opposites by both the said and the unsaid working together to create something new" (Hutcheon, 63).

Hutcheon's main concern is to argue that ironic meaning possesses three major semantic characteristics: it is **relational**, **inclusive** and **differential**. By "relational" she means that irony operates not only between meanings (the said, and the unsaid) but between people, whose judgments give irony the critical edge we so often recognize when we speak of irony's victims, or the superiority of those who share an ironic interpretation. We will return to this aspect of irony when we consider the creation of ethical readings of Ulysses.

Irony is **inclusive**, in Hutcheon's view, rather than simply antiphrastic, the result of the simple substitution of the opposite meaning when an utterance is used ironically. And the **differential** aspect of irony "offers an explanation of the problematic kinship between irony and other tropes and forms such as metaphor and allegory" (Hutcheon 58-9) (There are traditions in literary theory which regard irony as an "instance of allegory's double meaning", or conversely, which regard allegory as a supremely ironic mode of discourse. Hutcheon clarifies the difference: "Allegory relies on an 'aptly suggestive resemblance' between the said and the unsaid, while irony is always structured on a relation of difference")

Hutcheon's major contribution to the discussion of irony, it seems to me, is her insistence in thinking of it as relational, "as the result of the bringing together of the said and the unsaid, each of which takes on meaning only in relation to the other." (Hutcheon, 58) While she continues to view the unsaid as always more powerful, in keeping with traditional theories (from Wayne Booth's to Frederic Jameson's), the relational and inclusive nature of irony, in Hutcheon's view, allows "a way to think about ironic meaning as something in flux, and not fixed. It also implies a kind of



simultaneous perception of more than one meaning in order to create a third composite (ironic) one." (Hutcheon, 60) This means that the appreciation of irony does not necessarily imply the rejection of one (literal) meaning to get at an "ironic" or "real" meaning of an utterance.

Traditional interpretations of irony as the result of antiphrasis often disregard the contextual nature of meaning. Grice's theory of irony (1972), for instance, simply supposes that the context of the utterance will not support an acceptance of the literal meaning as the intended one; a meaning must be found which will fit the immediate circumstance, and the opposite of the literal meaning is often a natural, even a first choice in many instances. (And, of course, in many instances, this is precisely what is intended.) But what happens if ironic meaning is constituted not only by an *either/or* substitution of opposites but by *both* the said *and* the unsaid working together? This is the question that Hutcheon pursues in her study.

Other theorists have struggled with the doubleness of discourse in various ways (Harold Bloom 1975, Kenneth Burke 1969, Mijail Bajtin 1984), and most of them propose certain descriptions of the kinds of relation two propositions, or utterances, might have with each other: dialectic, dynamic, dialogical. Without taking sides, and without trying too hard to characterize in much detail the nature of the doubleness of irony, Hutcheon argues that the simultaneity of difference is key to her theory, and the source of much of the pleasure we take in recognizing irony.

The particular moment in *Ulysses* when Bloom collects the morning mail from the hall floor is recalled later in the morning. As he walks through the back garden on his way to the jakes, he wonders, "*Where is my hat by the way? Must have put it back on the peg. Or hanging up on the floor. Funny I don't remember that. Hallstand too full. Four umbrellas, her raincloak. Picking up the letters*" (Bloom, 68) The first occurrence of the event, here recalled, occurred a full seven pages

previously. We are now in a position to reconstruct at least some of Bloom's actions at the moment of picking up the letters.

Did he leave his hat on the floor, or put it back on the peg? He seems to supply an answer in the process of recalling. "Hallstand too full." This is a reason he gives himself for leaving his hat on the floor. We might imagine something different: He enters his house, perhaps with his hat in his hand. Seeing letters on the hall floor, he bends to pick them up. Recognizing Boylan's "bold hand" on a letter addressed to "Mrs Marion Bloom" (in strict disregard of required etiquette, the letter is addressed as to a widow, instead of to Mrs. Leopold Bloom). His heart slows (perhaps the result of the blood rushing to his head?) and, feeling faint, he reaches out to support himself with a hand on the floor, leaving his hat there in the process. And distracted by this evidence, or reminder, of his wife's affair, he leaves his hat on the floor, and is further distracted by her calling to him from upstairs, thus deprived of any time to himself to compose his emotions.

We are now in possession of assumptions about Bloom's emotional state. These will interact in some kind of dynamic tension with our readings of the events of the morning, and with the events of the rest of the day. They are assumptions which will be tested against our observations of Bloom in his relations with other people as he goes about the day's activities, beginning with his wife, Molly. She calls him as she hears him come in, and he enters the bedroom (perhaps tellingly, perhaps not so, we do not accompany him up the stairs. What was he thinking as he carried this letter to her?) "Who are the letters for?" she asks. "*He looked at them. Mullingar. Milly.*" Perhaps looking for a way to answer her question without mentioning Boyle (whose name, after all, does not appear in a return address on the letter to Molly, although we are not told this specifically), he says, "*A letter for me from Milly, he said carefully, and a card to you. And a letter for you.*"

There are a couple of ways we can read that word “carefully.” It is wonderfully ambiguous. Either Bloom is being careful to avoid any first mention of Boylan (although he will have to ask eventually), or he is being careful of Molly’s feelings since he received a letter from their daughter Milly, and his wife received only a card. One hesitates to ascribe to Bloom such fine feelings towards his wife at such a moment, but as we come to know him, it becomes less impossible to conceive of him as just such a man. Or, since we do not know him very well yet, he may be “carefully” making sure that his wife knows that he got a letter while she only got a card. This would be a cruel act, perhaps forgivable under the circumstances, and we might want to decide at some point whether we think Bloom is really capable of that kind of cruelty.

He turns to raise the blind on the window, letting the morning light into the bedroom, giving Molly a moment to herself.

*“Letting the blind up by gentle tugs halfway his backward eye saw her glance at the letter and tuck it under her pillow.”* There’s nothing particularly subtle about Molly Bloom, or perhaps she just hasn’t had her tea yet.

While the early history of Ulysses criticism was related either to disparagement of its obscurity, or to exegesis as an attempt to clarify its obscurities, recent criticism (Kenner is one of the first Americans to move in this direction), has been able to explore the nature of the reader’s interaction with the text. (The return of the reader as a central component in literary theoretical discussions has its own interesting history, see Terry Eagleton for a good example). Building extensively, and advancing significantly, the work of Roman Ingarden, Wolfgang Iser sketches an outline of the basic components involved in the relations between reader and text.

Iser argues that horizons (of expectation, or of an imagined world) are created by, and are a part of, any reader’s interpretation of any utterance or sentence; gaps exist between the utterance and a complete (or completely

imagined) world and must be “filled out” by a reader; the process of filling gaps and establishing horizons constitutes the creation of a “virtual dimension” of a text, which interacts fruitfully with its written, or literal, dimension. Memory plays a central role: *“Whatever we have read sinks into our memory and is foreshortened. It may later be evoked again and set against a different background with the result that the reader is enabled to develop hitherto unforeseeable connections”* (Iser, 54). I would add that the virtual dimension of a previously read text also constitutes a memory that may be evoked by some future text, and used to enrich or change the virtual dimension, or narrative world, which is thus continually under construction.

We are now faced, it seems, with the possibility of combining parts of two theories in the hopes of bringing them to bear on one small, albeit highly charged, moment in Leopold Bloom’s morning. Certain parts of various theories of verbal and textual irony, along with aspects of reader reception theory, lay a foundation for a thorough characterization of what a reader might do, or be invited to do, by the specific passages from *Ulysses* cited above.

At first reading of Bloom’s collection of the mail, we do nothing more than supply the furniture necessary to understand the basics of the action. We supply the opening of the door, the bending to pick up the mail, and Bloom’s ascent of the stairs to the bedroom. We remember he is wearing black, and carrying a package from the butcher’s, (which he may have carried to the kitchen before going upstairs. Did he take a moment to himself in the kitchen?)

The importance of the letter increases as we observe Bloom’s reaction, and Molly’s hiding of it under her pillow.

As Bloom wonders where his hat is, we reconstruct, with the minimal clue “hanging up on the floor,” the confusion and disorientation that Bloom must have felt on seeing the letter from Boylan.

And his comment, "Funny, I don't remember that," invites precisely the complex ironic reading that Hutcheon wants to propose in place of the simple anaphrasis. It is not funny of course, that Bloom was distracted and upset by the arrival of Boylan's letter, but is "funny" that he would not remember such an odd thing as leaving his hat on the floor. The idea of "hanging" his hat on the floor is funny in yet another sense, but to Bloom, and to us, only retrospectively.

Much of the world of *Ulysses* is constructed retrospectively. This explains, in part, the ability of so many readers to take so much pleasure in *Ulysses* over so many years. We read it over and over again, not just because it's a particularly good novel, but because we can, even, to an extent, because we have to.

And as we do, we come to know the characters, particularly Bloom, in ways that are deeper, more personal, more intimate, than the ways of knowing that we are used to as readers of realist fiction. Partly, of course, this is due to the technique of the interior monologue. But as we have seen in this example, we are also able to take responsibility for a fuller reconstruction, not only of events, or material aspects of the character's surroundings, but of his psychological state at a particular moment, even of his moral character. And once we do that, we are bound to make moral judgments about him. Judgments that are our own, not supplied in any way by the author. Joyce himself, by all accounts, was incredibly judgemental about his friends, but as the artist/god of creation, he reserves judgment about his creatures. The reader finds himself in the company of a man (Bloom) who makes ethical choices in matters small and great. And for some reason or another, we don't simply make a final moral judgment about Bloom. Perhaps it is our participation in the reconstruction of his ethics that prevents such a final judgment. Whatever the case, I suspect that many readers reach a point at which they find themselves asking a question that occurs to readers of novels only rarely: "*What*

would I do? Would I behave as well, or as badly?" I think it's a brave question, and I think *Ulysses* is a brave book.

### Works Cited

- Bakhtin, Mikhail** (1981), *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.
- Bloom, Harold** (1961), *A Map of Misreading*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Booth, Wayne C.** (1974), *A Rhetoric of Irony*. University of Chicago Press.
- Burke, Kenneth** (1969), *A Rhetoric of Motives*. Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Eagleton, Terry** (1996), *Introduction to Literary Theory*. Blackwell.
- Fish, Stanley** (1990), *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies*. Duke University Press.
- Hutcheon, Linda** (1994), *Irony's Edge*. Routledge.
- Iser, Wolfgang** (1974), *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1978), *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.
- Kenner, Hugh** (1987), *Ulysses*. Johns Hopkins UP.
- Muecke, D.C.** (1970), *Irony*. Critical Idiom Series, vol. 13. London: Methuen.