

The Man in the Macintosh: May Manifested

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It has long been speculated as to who the man in the brown macintosh could be from James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Many theories have been presented from the figure representing God or the devil to Death or James Joyce himself. Vladimir Nabokov suggested that given how Stephen Dedalus spent time discussing Shakespeare's presence in his own work, Joyce was doing the same with the mysterious man in the macintosh. However, I would like to take his theory one step further. In the "Ithaca" episode, Joyce referred to M'Intosh as a "selfinvolved enigma" which hinted that his identity was not to be found without, but within. And so it is with that in mind, similar to the sense of metempsychosis mentioned in the "Calypso" episode, that I propose the man in the macintosh is, in fact, symbolic of Joyce's guilt over having not reconciled with his mother, May, before her death.

Mary Jane "May" Murray was very religious and it greatly upset her that her son, James, was drifting from Catholicism. Following the death of his young brother, George, he refused to observe Easter and argued bitterly with his mother. "His mother told all to her confessor who advised her to distance herself and her children from the heretic, but she was unable to excommunicate her favourite child from her deepest affections" (Bowker 2011, 84). James and his mother never came to common ground in regard to religion again.

In *Stephen Hero*, Joyce wrote about Stephen's argument over religion with his mother with Mrs. Dedalus blaming the books he was reading for his departure from Catholicism. She exclaimed, "I'll burn every one of them. I won't have them in the house to corrupt anyone else," to which Stephen replied, "If you were a genuine Roman Catholic, mother, you would burn me as well as the books." This was clearly an episode of Joyce's own life that received much attention in his literary works.

Having later been diagnosed with cancer, May suffered for many months at home until she slipped into a coma and passed away. According to biographer Richard Ellmann, “her fear of death put her in mind of her son’s impiety, and on the days following Easter she tried to persuade him to make his confession and take communion. Joyce, however, was inflexible” (129). Regardless, her family had gathered at her deathbed, wishing to observe final rites. “When my mother lapsed into unconsciousness,” wrote Stanislaus, “and it became apparent that her last moments had come, Uncle John knelt down with all the others and began to pray in a loud voice. Then seeing that neither my brother nor I was praying, he made an angry, peremptory gesture to us to kneel down. Neither of us paid any attention to him; yet even so the scene seems to have burnt itself into my brother’s soul” (Joyce 1958, 234). This guilt would later manifest into the character of the man in the macintosh in his masterpiece, *Ulysses*. Just as Joyce stood off to the side of his mother’s deathbed, so did the man in the macintosh at the funeral in the “Hades” episode.

Much like guilt, sneaking up on someone from a long-ago past, the man in the macintosh first appeared when Leopold Bloom was attending the funeral of his friend, Paddy Dignam, in Glasnevin Cemetery. The figure appeared on the peripheral of the scene when Bloom reflected, “Always someone turns up you never dreamt of. A fellow could live on his lonesome all his life” (Joyce 1986). And similar to an abstract thought appearing, seemingly from nowhere during the day, guilt can disappear just as quickly, much like the man in the macintosh does as Bloom notes with, “Where has he disappeared to? Not a sign...become invisible.”

Following May’s death, Stanislaus found an epiphany that Joyce wrote about “two mourners” heading “towards the mortuary chapel.” “When I read it, I remembered that I too, had noticed the pair,” as Stanislaus recalled. “They were in a little group at the gate of Glasnevin

Cemetery in a funeral preceding my mother's. As Jim disliked funerals and avoided going to them, his impressions for the 'Hades' episode of *Ulysses* must have been gathered either at my mother's funeral or at my younger brother Georgie's" (Joyce 1958, 235). At the same cemetery where May and George were buried, the guilt of her passing on unresolved terms unexpectedly haunted Joyce in this scene of the novel. This was the same cemetery where, in the novel, Mrs. Dedalus (maiden name: May Goulding) — symbolic of May just as Stephen is of Joyce — was buried. Just as Odysseus met in Hades the phantom of his mother who died yearning for her son, in the Hades episode Bloom/Joyce came across the manifestation of May who died yearning for her son's immortal soul. It is also significant that we know Joyce was already writing about some enigmatic figures on the edges of funerals in Glasnevin, including potentially that of his mother's.

Bloom later counted the number of attendees at the funeral, noticing that the man in the macintosh was not among those invited. "Twelve. I'm thirteen. No. The chap in the macintosh is thirteen. Death's number...Silly superstition that about thirteen" (Joyce 1986). This was an interesting observation by Bloom. Joyce was a superstitious man and he would have known that death's number, meaning thirteen, is a reference to a deck of Tarot cards used for divination, a practice dating back all the way to the mid-15th century. According to Tarot lore, despite thirteen being marked symbolically by death, it doesn't necessarily imply that the person with that card will experience a death. More accurately, thirteen is symbolic of not taking life for granted and living life to the fullest. This is appropriate given how Joyce felt about his late mother. "He felt deeply about his mother's plight," according to Bowker, "married to an abusive drunk and worn down by endless pregnancies and invasive poverty" (84). The mention of "Death's number" and "thirteen" is a reference to this guilt Joyce felt at his mother not living a full and happy life,

dying young. He even referenced this in a letter to his wife, Nora, on August 29, 1904 when he wrote, “My mother was slowly killed, I think, by my father’s ill-treatment, by years of trouble, 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” (Joyce 1975). It was a regret he carried all his life.

Even in *Stephen Hero*, Mrs. Dedalus — symbolic of May — reflected this sense of a life having not fully been lived. After reading some selected plays by Ibsen that Stephen suggested, she “found Nora Helmer a charming character.” Nora Helmer, the hopelessly devoted housewife and mother of *A Doll’s House*, left her husband at the end of the play; it was an act of defiance and yearning for independence that May never realized in life.

Also, there is meaning attached to this number thirteen for which Bloom identifies the man in the macintosh. Joyce’s mother, May, passed away on August 13th 1903. Here you have the number thirteen in the day she passed away. You also have the number when the individual numbers in the year of her death are added: $1 + 9 + 0 + 3 = 13$. In relation to his mother’s death, the number thirteen carries much significance.

Following the death of May, Joyce’s friend Oliver St. John Gogarty, spread the rumor that not only did Joyce refuse to kneel and pray at his mother’s deathbed, but he also refused to take holy communion despite her pleas. This was a hurtful rumor to Joyce, affecting his relationships with those in his social circle. Likewise, there was also a hint of misunderstanding among the rumors surrounding the man in the macintosh, notably his name. When Hynes asked Bloom who the mysterious man was, he unknowingly assumed the description was his name. “M’Intosh, Hynes said scribbling. I don’t know who he is. Is that his name?” (Joyce 1986). This was a

mistake later published in the newspaper of those in attendance at Dignam's funeral. Again, we see a commonality between Joyce's guilt towards his mother and the man in the macintosh. This time the commonality relates to misunderstanding following tragedy.

Later in the novel, there is a quick allusion to the man in the macintosh that again ties into the theory he represents Joyce's guilt over the lack of resolution in his relationship with May. Snuck into the "Cyclops" episode is the line, "The man in the brown macintosh loves a lady who is dead" (Joyce 1986). This could be a reference to May, whose passing was still raw in Joyce's memory and an ever-present force in his writing. May was buried in Glasnevin Cemetery, the very graveyard where the man in the macintosh was seen mourning. And it is worth noting that just as Joyce wrote in the "Telemachus" episode of the ghost of Stephen's mother "within its loose brown graveclothes," Ellmann recounted that after May's funeral, "James and Margaret got up at midnight to see their mother's ghost, and Margaret thought she saw her in the brown habit in which she was buried" (136). Both May and the enigmatic figure in the same cemetery were wearing brown.

Following May's death, Joyce drifted further from his religious upbringing and rekindled a love of heavy drinking and visiting Nighttown. "With his mother no longer a moral presence in his life, Joyce was intent upon following William Blakes' youthful slogan that the road of excess led to the palace of wisdom. Gogarty and company were all too willing to accompany him down that road" (Bowker 2011, 112). In the "Circe" episode we saw Bloom also delve into hallucinations after a night with his friends in a brothel. During this episode, the man in the macintosh appeared and pointed a judgmental finger at Bloom, exclaiming, "Don't you believe a word he says. That man is Leopold M'Intosh, the notorious fireraiser. His real name is Higgins" (Joyce 1986). This is an interesting line of dialogue considering that the man in

the macintosh referred to Bloom as himself and then referred to himself as “Higgins”. In the novel, Higgins was Bloom’s mother’s maiden name. This was a subtle reference to Joyce’s own mother in a scene fueled by alcohol and guilt.

But there is more to this subtle line by the man in the macintosh than initially meets the eye. At the turn of the 20th century, Joyce was writing poetry and some concerned themselves with the theme of sinning. In his biography of Joyce, Richard Ellmann recounted a few poetic fragments preserved by Stanislaus. One of these poems was about “the beauty of his mistress and the transiency of flesh” in which “he sententiously predicts death and destruction for the chief of sinners, apparently himself” (81) and ended with:

“And all my envious, bitter cruel thoughts that came
Out of the past and stood by the bier whereon he lay
Pointed their long, lean fingers through the gloom...
O Name,
Ineffable, proud Name to whom the cries ascend
From lost, angelical orders, seraph flame to flame
For this end have I hated him — for this poor end?” (81)

While the last line of this poem resembled, as Ellmann pointed out, Yeats’s work, the rest seemed eerily similar to the above quote by the man in the macintosh: the man in the brown macintosh “points an elongated finger” and in the poem Joyce wrote, “...pointed their long, lean fingers through the gloom...”; the man in the macintosh was keen on declaring Bloom’s real name and in the poem Joyce wrote, “O Name, / Ineffable, proud Name...”; and the man in the macintosh referred to Bloom/M’Intosh as “the notorious fireraiser” and in the poem Joyce wrote of those crying to the proud Name, “...seraph flame to flame...” The similarity in language

combined with the connected theme of Catholic guilt brought about through sinning further alludes to the man in the macintosh as the manifested guilt Joyce felt in regards to his mother.

Likewise, at the very end of the “Sirens” episode, Leopold Bloom thought to himself, “Wonder who was that chap at the grave in the brown macin. O, the whore of the lane!” (Joyce, 1986). Here Leopold was interrupted in his thoughts about the enigmatic figure by the approaching presence of a familiar prostitute. Bloom hoped to himself that she passed without noticing him. Again, we have the sense of guilt shrouding this mysterious persona.

However, all this gallivanting in brothels took a toll on Joyce. “In March he wrote to Gogarty reporting a sexual infection and asking his advice,” according to Bowker. “Gogarty was amused at Joyce’s visitation and replied in suitably Elizabethan fashion: ‘Congratulations that our holy mother has judged you worthy of the stigmata...it would be absurd and pernicious for me to prescribe for a penis in a poke so to speak. I enclose a letter for you to hand to my old friend Dr Walsh one of the best...If I would venture an opinion – you have got a slight gleet from a recurrence of original sin. But you’ll be all right.’ He warned him not to neglect the condition, otherwise it could become incurable” (115). There was reference to a sexually-transmitted disease here as well as “original sin” which would certainly play in to a sense of Catholic guilt for Joyce. In the “Oxen of the Sun” episode, there was more discussion of the man in the macintosh connecting to this episode in Joyce’s life. In this scene, there was even mention of a sexually-transmitted disease. “Golly, whatten tunket’s yon guy in the mackintosh? Dusty Rhodes. Peep at his wearables. By mighty! What’s he got? Jubilee mutton. Bovril, by James. Wants it real bad. D’ye ken bare socks? Seedy cuss in the Richmond? Rawthere! Thought he had

a deposit of lead in his penis. Trumpery insanity. Bartle the Bread we calls him. That, sir, was once a prosperous cit. Man all tattered and torn that married a maiden all forlorn” (Joyce 1986). Left untreated, a sexually-transmitted disease like syphilis could lead to insanity which led many such patients to Richmond Asylum in Grangegorman, mentioned in the above quote. This was a fear Gogarty communicated in his letter to Joyce, should he leave his ailment untreated. The once prosperous citizen, now “all tattered and torn that married a maiden all forlorn” applies to Joyce’s father, John, who crashed the family’s wealth into poverty.

A few sentences later, Joyce wrote, “Walking Mackintosh of lonely canyon.” Heavy drinking of alcohol and gallivanting with prostitutes would have certainly spurred the condemnation of a Catholic mother. Not only was there the coincidence of the man in the macintosh being referred to along with a sexually-transmitted disease here, but there was also mention of bread — a potent symbol we see again in the novel.

Earlier, in “The Wandering Rocks” episode, there was a quick sighting of the elusive figure crossing a street. “In Lower Mount street a pedestrian in a brown macintosh, eating dry bread, passed swiftly and unscathed across the viceroy’s path” (Joyce 1986). Again, we saw reference to bread with the man in the macintosh. The eating of bread during Catholic communion is symbolic of the absorption of the body of Christ into oneself. It was a mean-spirited story spread by Gogarty following May’s passing that Joyce refused to take communion on her deathbed. Here, and later in the “Oxen of the Sun” episode, we saw reference to this guilt. This is all the more fascinating when one considers that early in the novel, Stephen had a guilt-racked dream of his mother in which she yelled at him, “Ghoul! Chewer of corpses!” to which Stephen replied, “Let me be and let me live” (Joyce 1986). The key here is “chewer of corpses”. It was a phrase repeated in the “Circe” episode. In communion — which Joyce refused his

mother on her deathbed according to Gogarty — the bread is symbolic of the body of Christ which the Catholic eats. It makes sense that she called him this which further emphasized why the man in the macintosh was eating dry bread. It was almost as if the man in the macintosh was appearing in the novel taking his communion, putting to rest this divisive rumor.

As his brother, Stanislaus recalled, the eating of bread during communion was a particularly potent symbol for Joyce in which he hoped "...to give people some kind of intellectual pleasure or spiritual enjoyment by converting the bread of everyday life into something that has a permanent artistic life of its own..." (104). From the story of Joyce refusing communion as his mother lay dying and the metaphorical and literary significance he attached to transubstantiation to the repetitive references of the man in the macintosh and the eating of bread, it can be seen how Joyce was weaving the guilt he felt in regard to his mother with the enigmatic character through the use of his own form of communion – the transformation of emotion into literature and vice versa.

When it comes to the eating of bread, there is also the sense of satisfying one's hunger. While abroad, Joyce repeatedly wrote to his mother, pleading for funds, expressing his dire conditions using effective pathos. On February 21, 1903 while in Paris, he wrote, "Dear Mother, Your order for 3s/4d of Tuesday last was very welcome as I have been without food for 42 hours (forty-two). Today I am twenty hours without food," and ends the letter with, "I regret this as Monday and Tuesday are carnival days and I shall probably be the only one starving in Paris" (Ellmann 122). And thus it is possible that the eating of dry bread could also be symbolic of the guilt Joyce felt at having begged for money from his impoverished and ill mother while he pursued his artistic vision.

It is worth mentioning that throughout the novel Stephen Dedalus was haunted by the recent passing of his mother and his guilt for having not prayed at her deathbed bedside. Buck Mulligan teased Stephen early in *Ulysses* in the “Telemachus” episode with, “You could have knelt down, damn it, Kinch, when your dying mother asked you, Buck Mulligan said. I’m hyperborean as much as you. But 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 1986). Likewise, in *Stephen Hero*, Cranly argued that Stephen should take communion for his mother’s sake, clarifying, “Your mother will suffer very much...The host for you is a piece of ordinary bread.” And during the hallucinations of the “Circe” episode, THE MOTHER, “in the agony of her deathrattle”, exclaimed, “Have mercy on Stephen, Lord, for my sake! Inexpressible was my anguish when expiring with love, grief and agony on Mount Calvary” (Joyce 1986). Just as Joyce felt the guilt over his refusal to pray at his own mother’s bedside prior to her death, the same was experienced by his alter ego, Stephen Dedalus. When reading an excerpt of *Ulysses* with Frank Budgen, directly after “Mother dying. Come home. Father” — a real message sent to Joyce from his father — in reference to the message Simon sent his son, summoning him back to Ireland, Budgen wrote, “Joyce looked up and said: ‘I haven’t let this young man off very lightly, have I? Many writers have written about themselves. I wonder if any of them have been as candid as I have?’” (51). While Stephen might clearly represent Joyce in this aspect, the man in the macintosh more enigmatically represented his guilt manifested.

Lastly, in the “Nausicaa” episode, Joyce wrote, “And that fellow today at the graveside in the brown macintosh. Corns on his kismet however.” This was a playful reference to corns on the feet, as noted in *James Joyce Online Notes* in which an 1895 anecdote competition revealed a misunderstanding of “kismet” which means “fate”. The thick accent made it sound like “feet”

and led to this humorous line which Joyce borrowed. This key sets up that the men in the brown macintoshes who appear throughout the novel weren't simply generic men in brown macintoshes, a fairly common sight in early 20th century Dublin; this was *the* man in the macintosh from the graveyard. The man in the macintosh from the graveyard had corns on his feet because he was walking around Dublin all day, following Leopold throughout *Ulysses*. Otherwise, it would seem an odd and unimportant detail to include in the novel. Richard Ellmann even noted that, "As May Joyce's condition became worse, James moved aimlessly about the city, waiting for her to die" (134). This also connects to the phrase "Walking Mackintosh" from the "Oxen of the Sun" episode.

Interestingly, we know that Joyce delved into the practice of literary steganography as revealed by Stephen Dedalus in *Ulysses* with his views on Shakespeare. As Richard Ellmann wrote, "Stephen fabricates Shakespeare's personal development from the evidence of his work. *Venus and Adonis* demonstrates for him that Shakespeare was seduced by Anne Hathaway, like Venus, an older woman; the gloomy *Richard III* and *King Lear* testify that Anne betrayed her husband with his two brothers-in-law Richard and Edmund, whose names Shakespeare accordingly attributes to the villains of those plays; the late plays show by their lightened feelings that the birth of a granddaughter had reconciled Shakespeare to his lot. This theory, which according to friends Joyce took more seriously than Stephen, suggests that *Ulysses* divulges more than an impersonal detached picture of Dublin life; it hints at what is, in fact, true: that nothing has been admitted into the book which is not in some way personal and attached" (364). It becomes more and more obvious the more we research into Joyce and his work that even a character as enigmatic and seemingly insignificant as the man in the macintosh must hold some personal significance for the author.

Ever since *Ulysses* was published, people have been asking about the identity of this elusive character. This is not, by any means, a definitive answer to that question. It is simply a previously unexplored possibility — one of the many in Joyce’s works. However, it does fulfill the purpose for the reader of constantly reminding him or her of the guilt Joyce felt at having not reconciled his relationship with his mother — a guilt that plagued his literary avatar, Stephen Dedalus. As Ellmann recounted, “his mother was part of the stable world he was engaged in renouncing; yet he did not want her to renounce him. If she died he could neither hurt nor please her; death was abandonment of response to him” (130). Guilt is not simply seen on the surface as we saw in the early dialogue between Stephen and Buck Mulligan. As Joyce explored in *Ulysses*, guilt is a deep, ubiquitous presence that follows us throughout our lives, like the man in the macintosh.

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