

## A "GREEKLY PERFECT" HEROINE: JAMES JOYCE'S GERTY MACDOWELL AND HOMER'S NAUSICAA

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### ABSTRACT

Critics of the "Nausicaa" episode of James Joyce's *Ulysses* have claimed that the character of Gerty MacDowell is either "too simple and too static," a mere embodiment of the "avatar temptress," or a "lonely character and a common cliché." But careful examination of the text and comparison with Joyce's chief source, *The Odyssey*, suggest that Gerty, like Homer's Nausicaa, is the representation of a female character coming of age in the modern world—a character whose perspective is essential to understanding the text. In addition, a comparison of Gerty and Nausicaa emphasizes the importance of their interactions with Bloom and Odysseus. This comparison also demonstrates that despite Joyce's high modernist language and his critiques of Victorian society in *Ulysses*, Joyce often exhibits a latent sentimentalism.

### INTRODUCTION

The significance of the character of Gerty MacDowell in James Joyce's *Ulysses* and the importance of her interaction with Joyce's protagonist Leopold Bloom often have been dismissed by critics. In *The Classical Temper*, S.L. Goldberg regards Gerty MacDowell as "too simple, too static" and "mechanical" to be of any real significance. Goldberg observes that Gerty is nothing more than a component of Joyce's "satirical attack on modern society" and he "wonder[s] if she is quite worth the twenty pages of his powder and shot" (141). By contrast, Fritz Senn recognizes the importance of the "Nausicaa" episode, viewing it not as a mere "satirical attack" but a "chapter of culminations, of aspirations and high expectations...of ecstatic flights and raised limbs" (277). However, Senn does not recognize Gerty's significance, merely labeling her character as the "latest avatar temptress in Joyce's fiction" (284). Vicki Mahaffey in "Ulysses and the End of Gender," suggests that Gerty is not part of a "satirical attack on modern society," as Goldberg has claimed, but a victim of the "Irish feminine ideal"—an ideal that reduces Gerty through its "pathetic limitations" into a "lonely caricature and common cliché" (160-161).

### DISCUSSION

In the critical discussion of Gerty MacDowell, Suzette Henke is vigorously defensive of both the importance of the "Nausicaa" episode and the significance of its heroine. Henke acknowledges in "Gerty MacDowell: Sentimental Heroine" that "although Gerty is the second most prominent female in *Ulysses*, she has generally been ignored by traditional critics, who see her either as a virgin-temptress or as a pale shadow of the more flamboyant Molly Bloom" (132). Henke treats Gerty as neither a "virgin temptress" nor a "pale shadow," exploring Gerty's character independent of these stereotypes and likening her to Gerty Flint, the heroine of Maria Cummin's 1854 Victorian novel *The Lamplighter*. However, there are important aspects of Joyce's Gerty which can be better understood by also focusing on Gerty's similarities to the classical heroine that originally inspired Joyce's inclusion of Gerty in his modern *Odyssey*—Homer's Nausicaa.

In exploring the "Nausicaa" episode's sources in Homer's *Odyssey* and by comparing Joyce's Gerty to Homer's Nausicaa, it becomes clear that Gerty is not "too simple and too static," a mere embodiment of the "avatar temptress," or "a lonely caricature and common cliché." Instead, the comparison of Nausicaa and Gerty reveals that Gerty is a figure in progress, and attempts to minimize her importance because of the supposed incompleteness or simplicity of her character misunderstand the

fact that Gerty's immaturity is her most significant feature. Indeed, Gerty is Joyce's female counterpart to male protagonist Stephen Daedalus, and she provides a valuable feminine perspective on the struggles of accepting and understanding adulthood in the modern world. Additionally, the comparison of Nausicaa and Gerty emphasizes the importance of their interactions with Odysseus and Bloom. Thus, the comparison of Nausicaa and Gerty proves Gerty to be undeniably integral to *Ulysses* and significant beyond the "Nausicaa" episode.

The sources of James Joyce's "Nausicaa" episode of *Ulysses* in Homer's sixth book of the *Odyssey* are evident from the very beginning of the chapter. In addition to applying Homer's figures and actions to a modern setting, Joyce also focuses his "Nausicaa" episode on themes found in Homer's sixth book. Gerty MacDowell's encounter with Leopold Bloom bears many resemblances to that between Nausicaa and Odysseus.

The most readily apparent similarities between Homer's *Odyssey* and Joyce's "Nausicaa" episode appear in the Homeric symbols Joyce appropriates. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus first notices the princess Nausicaa and her maidens after she "threw her ball off line and missed, and put it in the whirling stream—at which they all gave such a shout, Odysseus awoke" (6.126-128). Similarly, Gerty and her friends become aware of Bloom after the twins kick their ball towards Bloom. After this, "the gentleman in black who was sitting there by himself came gallantly to the rescue and intercepted the ball" (U 355). In addition to the ball game, another symbol which occurs both in book six of the *Odyssey* and Joyce's "Nausicaa" episode is Nausicaa's cart. In the *Odyssey*, Nausicaa asks her father for a "gig with pretty wheels and a cargo box upon it" in order to transport her linens to the river for washing (6.76-77). In *Ulysses*, Nausicaa's "gig" becomes a pushcar holding a baby. Both Nausicaa's gig and the baby carriage which accompanies Gerty represent their impending womanhood—the baby in Gerty's pushcar signifies the adult prospect of motherhood and Nausicaa must wash the cart's linen in preparation for marriage, so her "wedding chest will brim by evening" (6.37-38).

In both instances, the girls are maturing and preparing for the adult roles of wife and mother. This aspect of the "Nausicaa" episode is overlooked by critics who focus on Gerty's role as a temptress or as an underdeveloped minor character. In addition to characterizing Gerty as the "avatar temptress," Fritz Senn claims that this episode is intended to illustrate the "opposite poles of womanhood: young, immature Gerty, lame and incomplete...and ripe, fullblown Molly" (283). However, as I mentioned above, if Gerty appears "incomplete" it is only because she is in the process of maturing, and has not yet achieved the "fullblown" womanhood of Molly. Gerty's comparison to Nausicaa proves that Gerty is not Molly's opposite, but rather a female character in the midst of the transition from girl to woman.

Like Nausicaa, Gerty has her own linens—her "undies," which "were Gerty's chief care" (U 350). The linens of Nausicaa and Gerty are among the most important symbols that define their characters. In the *Odyssey*, the character of Nausicaa is introduced as Athena urges her to "go washing in the shine of morning!" so that "Maidenhood must end!" (6.36-38). Nausicaa maturely accepts washing the linen as her responsibility, and she tells her father that "I must take all our things and get them washed at the river pools; our linen is all soiled" (6.66-67). In accepting this duty as her own, Nausicaa indicates her readiness for womanhood and the duties of adult women in her society.

Nausicaa and her maidens then devote meticulous attention to washing the linens, which "all being drubbed, all blemish rinsed away, they spread them piece by piece" (6.100-101). This thorough description is emulated by Joyce as he recounts Gerty's care of her "undies." Gerty "aired them herself and blued them when they came home from the wash and ironed them and she had a brickbat to keep the iron on because she wouldn't trust those washerwomen as far as she'd see them scorching the things" (U 350-351). This careful attention to the linens of Nausicaa, the "undies" of Gerty, and the special care they receive signifies the importance of these symbols of adulthood. Also, like Nausicaa's acceptance of Athena's declaration, Gerty's attention to her "undies" indicates her conformity to the image of womanhood advertised by her society.

However, Gerty's compliance to the societal ideal of womanhood does not solely signify a character who "is so thoroughly indoctrinated by the image of the culturally desirable young woman that she cannot own or realize her own desires," as Mahaffey suggests (159). Instead, it illustrates that Gerty, like Nausicaa, is an adolescent girl struggling to grow up—and naturally reliant upon society's ideals. It

is not that Gerty is incapable of realizing her own desires, but like Nausicaa, her desire to become an adult woman requires a certain degree of conformity to the practices which define womanhood in her society.

Although Nausicaa and Gerty make efforts to demonstrate their readiness for marriage and adulthood, both Homer and Joyce establish the virginity and naivety of the girls. Homer makes Nausicaa's chastity clear in the *Odyssey*, when Nausicaa observes to Odysseus, "I myself should hold it shame for any girl to flout her own dear parents, taking up with a man, before her marriage" (6.304-306). Likewise, while Gerty desires to experience physical intimacy, she does not seek sex outside of marriage.

Both Nausicaa and Gerty are also associated with imagery which represents their virginity. The appearance of their skin is frequently described as white, Nausicaa "flashing first with her white arms" and Gerty bearing a face "almost spiritual in its ivorylike purity" (*Odyssey* 6.109 & *U* 348). Additionally, in the "Nausicaa" episode of *Ulysses*, Joyce draws parallels between Gerty and the Virgin Mary. The colors blue and white, commonly associated with the Virgin Mary, are the colors of Gerty's undies. Henke observes that "Gerty exhibits the waxen pallor of a Greek nymph, a plaster saint, or the Catholic Virgin, 'Tower of Ivory'" (136). Moreover, the Virgin Mary is Gerty's principal role model. She thinks of "the most pious Virgin's intercessory power" and how "it was not recorded in any age that those who implored her were ever abandoned by her" (*U* 356). The men's temperance retreat taking place at the nearby Star of the Sea church offers supplications to the Virgin Mary, which further emphasizes Gerty's similarity to her.

Another parallel between the characters of Nausicaa and Gerty is their desire to find a husband and marital happiness. Homer's Odysseus, the great tactician, is perceptive enough to recognize Nausicaa's inner desires and seeks to capture her good will in his plea to her for help by addressing her wishes for domesticity. After entreating her for mercy, Odysseus prays: "may the gods accomplish your desire: a home, a husband and harmonious converse with him – the best thing in the world being a strong house held in serenity where man and wife agree" (6.194-198). Like Nausicaa, Gerty longs for a "dreamhusband," with whom she could live in a "snug and cosy little homely house" where they would have "brekky" every morning, "simple but perfectly served" (*U* 352).

In Nausicaa's encounter with Odysseus and Gerty's with Bloom, both girls imagine that they have found their "dreamhusband," a model of the man they long to marry. After meeting Odysseus, Nausicaa tells her maidens that "he looks like one of heaven's people. I wish my husband could be as fine as he and glad to stay forever on Skheria!" (6.258-260). Likewise, Gerty imagines, "here was that of which she had so often dreamed. It was he who mattered and there was joy on her face because she wanted him because she felt instinctively that he was like no-one else. The very heart of the girlwoman went out to him, her dreamhusband" (*U* 358). This desire is certainly different from that implied by Senn's characterization of Gerty as an "avatar temptress," and illustrates Gerty's girlish romanticism rather than the attitude of a seductress.

It is also significant that Odysseus and Bloom are the first men that Nausicaa and Gerty encounter after their acceptance of womanhood. Nausicaa and Gerty are able to envision Odysseus and Bloom as their "dreamhusbands" because they are strangers upon which the young women are able to impose their fantasies. Nausicaa imagines that she will find a husband "somewhere else" other than her country, since "none of our own [Phaikians] will suit her, though many come to court her" (6.301-302). Like Nausicaa, Gerty views Bloom as the exotic lover she desires and "could see at once by [Bloom's] dark eyes and his pale intellectual face that he was a foreigner, the image of the photo she had of Martin Harvery, the matinee idol" (*U* 357).

While both Odysseus and Bloom admire Nausicaa's and Gerty's physical beauty, neither views the young women as potential lovers, but instead are reminded of their wives. Odysseus remembers Penelope when he wishes for Nausicaa her own home of "harmonious converse" between husband and wife, "a strong house held in serenity where man and wife agree" (6.195-198). W.B. Stanford, in *Essays on the Odyssey*, interprets this type of wish as one "that must have come from the heart of a man separated so long from his own wife" (21).

In *Ulysses*, Gerty similarly draws Bloom's attention not only towards herself, but the wife from whom he has been apart all day. Bloom smells Gerty's "sweet and cheap" perfume and is reminded

"Why Molly likes opopanax. Suits her with a little Jessamine mixed. Her high notes and low notes" (*U* 374). Bloom also thinks that Gerty might be "near her monthlies, I expect, [which] makes them feel ticklish" (*U* 368). When Molly reveals in the "Penelope" episode that she is indeed about to get her period, this fact further links the character of Gerty to Molly.

Additionally, as I noted above, both Gerty and Nausicaa also significantly evoke Bloom's and Odysseus' thoughts of their sons – Bloom's surrogate son Stephen and Odysseus' son Telemachus. The authors of *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey* suggest that "in many respects Nausicaa is a feminine doublet of Telemachus, a model of decorum and courtesy" (291). While Nausicaa fantasizes about Odysseus as her husband, the recognition of this idea is impossible in the *Odyssey* and Odysseus does not reciprocate beyond admiration of her physical beauty. In both *Essays on the Odyssey* and *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey*, the authors mention Goethe's unfinished tragedy in which Nausicaa and Odysseus do marry one another, with disastrous consequences. W.B. Stanford remarks, "Goethe with his profound insight into Homer's world saw that any such relationship between the grizzled veteran and this unsophisticated girl would have only brought tragedy to the weaker one" (23).

Sensing Nausicaa's innocence, Odysseus responds to her in a non-threatening and fatherly way, instead of seductively or romantically. W.B. Stanford suggests that in his interaction with Nausicaa, "perhaps Odysseus was helped by remembering that if Penelope had borne him a daughter before he had gone to Troy she would be about Nausicaa's age or a little older by now... So at least, his gentle sensibility towards a young girl's feelings suggests" (21). Odysseus's kindness towards Nausicaa is demonstrated in his reluctance to grab her knees in supplication. He is considerate of Nausicaa's feelings and "he thought it best to trust in words to please her – and keep away; he might anger the girl, touching her knees" (6.157-159).

Joyce establishes Bloom as a father figure to Gerty by further developing the character of Gerty and her perception of Bloom. Gerty longs for a husband not only for the purpose of sensual gratification, but also for protection and affirmation. She wishes to be "embraced gently" by someone who loves her as "his ownest girlie, for herself alone" (*U* 358). These desires indicate the loneliness and vulnerability of Gerty and her intense need for male acceptance. Like Stephen, Gerty has been failed by her alcoholic father, and longs for the approval and comfort of a loving man. Suzette Henke observes that: "Gerty MacDowell is male identified. And the paucity of masculine affirmation in her life intensifies her alienation. Her father is an alcoholic; Father Conroy, a celibate... In a society where males are enervated, impotent, or simply uninterested, male-identification may be disastrous" (135). Gerty views Bloom not only as a potential lover, but also as a positive male figure whose admiration may lessen her isolation.

Like Gerty, Bloom is also seeking to escape his feelings of isolation and desperately needs affirmation. The "Nausicaa" episode of *Ulysses* follows the "Cyclops" episode in which Bloom is ostracized by his peers and argues with the citizen. For both Gerty and Bloom, their interaction offers them a feeling of connection with another person, lessening their loneliness. Suzette Henke contends that, "Like Leopold Bloom, Gerty sustains herself through the copious creations of a fertile imagination. Bloom dreams of erotic titillation; Gerty yearns for spiritual passion. Both share a pathetic isolation from consummated physical love" (137). While neither Gerty nor Bloom achieves such love in the "Nausicaa" episode, they both experience a meaningful connection which alleviates, to some extent, the intensity of their longing. Gerty's knowledge that she is attractive to Bloom and capable of arousing him satisfies her desire for male affirmation. Bloom achieves the sexual release he has been longing for all day, after his masturbation, and is physically satisfied.

Odysseus and Nausicaa also experience a meaningful connection which helps relieve their feelings of isolation. Odysseus yearns to be reunited with Penelope in Ithaca, and Nausicaa to find herself a suitable husband. Like Bloom and Gerty, they are separated from what they desire, but briefly manage to find a measure of comfort in each other. Odysseus affirms Nausicaa's beauty, confessing "never have I laid eyes on equal beauty in man or woman. I am hushed indeed" and praises her desirability as a potential wife by telling her, "one man's destiny is more than blest – he who prevails and takes you as his bride" (6.171-174).

Nausicaa helps Odysseus in a very elemental way by offering him "refuge" and "clothing" and "any other comfort due to a man in distress" (6.206-207). She also orders her maids to bring their "new

guest some food and drink, and take him into the river, out of the wind, to bathe" (6.223-224). It is significant that while Nausicaa and Gerty are helped emotionally through Odysseus's and Bloom's affirmation of their desirability, Nausicaa's and Gerty's contribution to Odysseus and Bloom is physically comforting rather than emotionally reassuring. However, despite these differences, the contributions of Nausicaa and Gerty to Odysseus and Bloom and the benefits they receive in exchange are equally significant.

The importance of the encounters of Nausicaa and Odysseus, and Bloom and Gerty, are evident in the leave-taking of the characters at the conclusion of their stories. Nausicaa says to Odysseus as he departs, "Fare well, stranger; in your land remember me who met and saved you. It is worth your thought" (8.493-494). Odysseus responds, "Be there and all my days until I die may I invoke you as I would a goddess, a princess to whom I owe my life" (8. 495-498). In *Ulysses*, Gerty's departure from Bloom continues in the sentimental tone of the episode. As Gerty stands to leave, "Their souls met in a last lingering glance and the eyes that reached her heart full of strange shining, hung enraptured on her sweet flowerlike face. She half smiled at him, wanly, a sweet forgiving smile, a smile that verged on tears, and then they parted" (*U* 367).

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of *Ulysses* which is revealed by exploring its indebtedness to the *Odyssey* is the story's focus on human compassion—an element largely unnoticed by critics. In both the *Odyssey* and *Ulysses*, two strangers meet by chance and are able to find unexpected comfort in one another. This is the most basic source of James Joyce's "Nausicaa" in Homer's *Odyssey*—its source as a story which details the human capacity for kindness and understanding, even in the most unlikely of situations.

## CONCLUSION

Despite Joyce's high modernist language and his critiques of Victorian society in *Ulysses*, by including the "Nausicaa" episode in his modern *Odyssey*, Joyce demonstrates a latent sentimentalism. It is not uncharacteristic for Joyce to shroud his sentimentalism in the unusual or gross. In the climactic "Ithaca" episode, for example, Steven and Bloom watch a shooting star while urinating, and in "Calypso," Bloom contemplates his artistic and literary capabilities while having a bowel movement. These episodes suggest that Joyce as an artist is still surprisingly Victorian, even beyond his emulation of sentimental Victorian language in the "Nausicaa" episode. These episodes also demonstrate, through the coexistence of the sentimental and rather unromantic bodily functions, that perhaps the Victorianism of Joyce has been consistently overlooked because of his tendency to obscure its obviousness.

The criticisms of Victorian society which the episode contains are not meant to attack its heroine, detract from her significance, or present her as a "lonely caricature and common cliché." If Gerty appears "incomplete," as Senn has suggested or "too simple, too static," as Goldberg has observed, it is only because she is still coming of age, and like Stephen Daedalus, has yet fully to mature. This immaturity is what makes the character of Gerty so significant, as Gerty, just like Nausicaa, represents a female coming of age that is essential to understanding the text. For these reasons, Gerty MacDowell's meeting with Bloom cannot be denied as one of the most meaningful, emotionally moving, and important episodes of *Ulysses*.

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