

In 1922, the same year that James Joyce published *Ulysses*, T. S. Eliot published “The Waste Land” and also published a path-breaking review entitled “*Ulysses*, Order and Myth.” Eliot tells us that Joyce’s novel is “the most important expression which the present age has found from which none can escape.” But it is not a novel “because the novel is a form which will no longer serve.” Joyce is “in advance of his time.” He is “manipulating a parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity. It is a way of controlling or ordering or giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.”

Although Joyce’s fictional universe is far from an immense panorama of futility and anarchy, he is, like Eliot, one of the archetypal modernists, a world-famous member of that exciting, revolutionary group of artists at the turn of the 20th century who transformed our sense of what poetry and fiction, painting and music and ballet were really about. With Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse, Igor Stravinsky and Arnold Schoenberg, Frank Lloyd Wright and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, George Balanchine and Martha Graham, Joyce and his cohort fashioned a whole new world of the creative imagination for us to enjoy.

As Eliot’s sermon tells us, it’s the *form* of *Ulysses* that is most revolutionary; Joyce was using “myth” — Homer and Homeric legend and post-Homeric-legend—to shape his masterpiece. But the world of *Ulysses* is not Eliot’s world of futility and anarchy, of overwhelming moral chaos and nihilistic despair. Life might be a “nullity” he wrote his son Georgio, but it is a “dolce niente,” a sweet nothingness. And *Ulysses*’s form—it is a great comedy—is the source of its sweetness. For Stephen Dedalus, comedy is the art form that issues in joy.

Joyce didn’t have his whole book in mind when he began writing. He knew his modern Odysseus, Leopold Bloom, a 38-year-old advertisement canvasser, must go through Dublin on Thursday, June 16, 1904, in a series of adventures like those in the *Odyssey*, although Joyce didn’t number or entitle his episodes. As he wrote, the narrative coalesced excitingly. The one-eyed Cyclops becomes the nameless Citizen who baits Bloom in Barney Kiernan’s pub. He is “one-eyed” in his inability to see men and women in their complex all-aroundness, and is thus lost to the human race in his fierce anti-semitism and xenophobic nationalism. In this episode—I’ve distributed schema that give the title and physical location of each episode—Bloom keeps brandishing a cigar in the face of the apoplectic Citizen. The cigar is simultaneously the spear that Odysseus used to blind Homer’s monster.

Joyce’s light-hearted references and cross-references to Homer suggest to some readers (but not to Eliot) that *Ulysses* is a great joke on Homer. But Joyce, as usual, has a double aim. The first is the mock-heroic, Bloom’s two-penny spear juxtaposed to Odysseus’s mighty spear. The world of cigars, though, is devoid of heroes only to those unable to see that Odysseus’s spear is also humdrum and homely—a sharpened stick. Bloom can demonstrate the admirable qualities of a mythic figure by word-of-mouth as effectively as Homer’s hero can by the thrust of a spear.

Leopold Bloom is not physically a fighter, but he is always unshakable. His victories are mental and moral despite the pervasive physicality of Joyce’s world. Throughout his odyssey, Bloom demonstrates the qualities of prudence and intelligence, curiosity and tact that we find in Homer’s hero. And something we don’t find in Odysseus—a fundamental good-heartedness, an irreducible, warm-hearted good will. In Joyce’s pacifist version of Homer’s epic, that good will —that basic decency and kindness—shines through, somehow redeeming the pain and sorrow of Joyce’s fallen yet hilarious world.