

# Spuds of Life:

## An Analysis of the Potato being a Symbol for Humanity's Need for Loss throughout James Joyce's Works

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If you had to encapsulate all of humanity in one word, what would it be? A disease? A virtue? Chances are the word used to describe humanity would be something lofty and all encompassing, but James Joyce challenges this notion by trying to define humanity all through one city, Dublin. He claims that if he can get to the heart of Dublin, especially in his iconic work *Ulysses*, then he can get to the heart of and understand greater humanity. While this is his main goal in one work, all of Joyce's novels contribute by showing how humanity creates its story and identity when experiencing a sense of loss. While it may seem that Dublin is the key to understanding humanity, Joyce successfully narrows the understanding of humanity down to something even more minute: a potato. By getting to the heart of and understanding a potato, Joyce's works comment on the greater implications of loss and love within humanity. Similar to a potato, it may be essential for humanity to lose a part of itself in order to truly understand love and create a future, more meaningful life.

Before understanding a potato as a symbol within Joyce, it is first important to understand the reproductive necessities of a potato and why fracture is necessary for germination in its lifecycle. As seen within UC Berkley's "Potato Genome Project," potatoes reproduce through cloning. To grow potatoes, you cut off a piece of an already existent potato and bury it, and a new potato buds out of this buried piece. This is the most common way to grow potatoes, and it is very rare to grow potatoes from seeds ("Potato Genome Project" 1). In other words, having an entirely new, non-cloned potato is almost nonexistent. Rather, it is primarily through a partial loss of itself that potatoes are able to reproduce. In this way, the potato connects life and loss in that it is by experiencing a loss of itself that potatoes continue to grow new life.

Though not explicitly related to the potato, Joyce's thematic use of gnomon speaks to the implicit importance of loss that occurs in human life, and this loss present in the gnomon actually greater highlights the original loss and the potential that can bud from this void. In geometry, a gnomon is a parallelogram with a smaller parallelogram missing from it. This is a re-occurring theme for Joyce, specifically through *Dubliners*, where many of the characters experience a greater discovery of life, or an epiphany, after first losing a sense of themselves. When discussing the importance of

these forced absences, Robert Newman's "South Atlantic Review" remarks, "By requiring the readers to supply the missing section, Joyce forces them to assume the authorial presence, to become co-creators of the text" (Newman 141). In this way, characters losing a part of themselves forces the reader to apply meaning to the work to further gain knowledge of the text, but because each reader is a "co-creator" of meaning, what each person gets from the work may be a seemingly independent variation of another reader's interpretation of the text. That being said, because both interpretations stem from one "authorial" loss, the readers' perceived individuality might be just a clone of that which was said before. In this way, perhaps even Joyce's redefinition of the English language was an individualized clone of influential thinkers like Milton who came before him. As a result, Joyce created life-giving works in response to the "missing sections" he saw in literature's roots.

Not only does this sense of meaning from void exist from meta-commentary, however, because the characters within Joyce's works, particularly *Ulysses*, grapple with this same sense of loss as they try to create meaning from fracture. Joyce encapsulates this sense of creation in loss in his usage of "potato" throughout *Ulysses*; Leopold Bloom, as the character united with the first usage of this term, appears to cling to his potato as he attempts to fill the voids of his failing marriage and dead son, Ruddy. When Leopold prepares breakfast for his wife, Marion, and tries to forget the increasingly detached marriage they have, he remarks, "potato I have" (*Ulysses* 57). The annotations of *Ulysses* say the "potato" was considered a continuity of life. This proves interesting because the Potato Famine of Ireland links the "potato" to the loss of many lives. While these concepts appear to be contradictory, it is also important to note that the Great Famine largely changed the Irish culture and identity. In this way, though the Famine could potentially show Ireland at its worst, perhaps during its greatest time of loss and hardship, the identity of Ireland was most growing and connected. As a result, though Leopold has this great sense of loss in his life from the loss of his son and distanced marriage, by clinging to his "potato," he clings to this sense of hope in a continuity of life and connection through these losses.

While Bloom holds onto this potato as a source of greater connection to his son and wife, it is interesting that his potato is more a part of his mother than it is Bloom, himself. The potato is "A talisman. Heirloom" (*Ulysses* 476) from Bloom's mother. There is no explanation for why she gave it to him, but just as she gave up her virginity to give life to her son, she gave up her potato to give Bloom a hope for finding the beautiful in the void. Commenting on the essential loss of a woman's virginity for future life in relation to colonialism, Shen Fuying's article "Childhood, Gender, and

Nation in *Ulysses*” states, “The purity of a nation is often allegorized by the loss of virginity, which results in the transformation of a girl to a whore-like woman” (Fuying 58). In this way, Bloom’s mother giving him the potato presents her “transformation” from her lost innocence and detaches her even further from her “pure” childhood. That being said, it further connects her son with the past and allows him to search for beauty and greater meaning in the loss of his son and wife while also offering him a concrete connection to his roots.

While this connection between Leopold and his mother makes sense in light of his apparent voids, it is complicating that this important “heirloom” came from Bloom’s mother when Stephen’s mother is the most prominently noted mother in all of Joyce’s stories. Through Stephen’s repressed guilt of not kneeling by her side while she died, readers might anticipate this need for connection to his past, inescapable failure. This moment may appear one entirely of loss for Stephen as he physically lost his mother and also emotionally loses his connection to her because he recognized that she never truly understood him. That being said, it is important to remember, as Stephen continues to grow into the artist he was destined to be, this moment of loss proves a source of creation and passion for his works. If “the object of the artist is the creation of the beautiful,” (Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* 162) then the death of Stephen’s mother serving as his “artistic object” creates a “beautiful” text where a man struggles to cope with the loss of his mother and the torn, emotional roots he once attributed to family.

If Joyce’s usage of “potato” shows up primarily in this positive light, its relation to the gnomon would be a near simplistic evaluation where loss serves solely to bring further life; however, as much as the potato brings about a new life, it also serves as a reminder of humanity’s mortality and temporal nature. When Leopold goes into a brothel, one of the prostitutes slides her hand “into [Bloom’s] pocket and brings out a hard black shriveled potato” (Joyce, *Ulysses* 476). The potato is “hard black [and] shriveled,” implying Bloom’s darkening relation to the Irish identity as he begins to recognize himself as an outsider amongst his friends in Dublin. Where, before, Bloom clung to his “potato” as an outlet to forget about the losses of Marion and Rudy, the emasculating prostitutes steal it and force Leopold to face reality. The prostitutes immediately afterwards force Bloom into sexually submissive positions, and Bloom does not ask for the potato back until after these exploits. In this way, perhaps Bloom’s need for the potato is in itself temporal and something that he needs only when he does not feel connected to another person.

Interestingly through this sense of loss, though showing Bloom’s temporal need for connection, Bloom consistently embodies a more urgent need to create meaning out of loss and

understand what it truly means to be Irish. Agata Szczeszak-Brewer's "Joyce's Vagina Dentata" recognizes that there is a connection between loss and cultural identity and states that a "connection exists between the feminine and the threat of loss. For Irish nationalists it is the loss of purity and order, for artists it is the loss of artistic inspiration" (Szczeszak-Brewer 2). In this way, the loss of Bloom's potato may actually represent the progression of his lost Irish identity and voiced authorship. When Bloom loses his potato, prostitutes take over the story and largely overpower Bloom's voice. However, by asking for his potato to be returned to him, Bloom aims to take back his Irish identity and the text. Just as "Irish nationalists" want Ireland to remain an independent nation from England, Bloom wants his voice to be independent from the prostitutes, and he asserts himself as the "artist" of the story. While Bloom losing his potato makes him more "feminine" by placing him in this inferior role, asserting that he wants it back allows him to be a father figure toward Stephen and serve as the everyday Irish man's messiah, yearning to create and demonstrate meaning out of perceived loss and nothingness.

As Bloom begins to take on a greater role as an artist, Joyce begins to assert his own voice more through Bloom than through Stephen as he did in the past, potentially paralleling Joyce's need to find meaning through his own diminishing ability for creation. Richard Ellman's *James Joyce* discusses how Joyce was losing his eyesight as he simultaneously was working on both *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*. Ellman notes, "Through blar eyes [Joyce] guessed at what he had written on paper, and with obstinate passion filled the margins and the space between the lines with fresh thoughts" (Ellman 574). Just as Bloom was focused on finding and creating meaning in his life with the loss of his wife, son, and potato, Joyce had a gnomon in his own life when he lost his ability to clearly see the pages through which his artistry and livelihood came into fruition. Though there is proof that Joyce had planned out these works before his eyesight completely faded, Joyce having to write these works with his face very close to the paper or having to orate his thoughts to a different scribe suggests that his hearing was forcibly becoming more sensitive. In this way, both the ending section of *Ulysses* and the entire presentation of *Finnegan's Wake* become more melodic pieces. With the loss of Joyce's eyesight, he gained a new sense of "artistic inspiration" and redefined the boundaries of authorship by writing with a focus on audible sensitivity.

Comparable to Joyce's redefined artistry, as Molly begins to embrace new definitions of femininity, she loses the traditional "inspiration" of an Irish woman and gains a new, more accurate depiction of Ireland than perhaps does any other character in the work. When Molly discusses how Milly acted when she lived with her, she notes that Milly "wouldn't even teem potatoes for you of

course she's right not to ruin her hands" (*Ulysses* 766). It is interesting that Milly "wouldn't even teem the potatoes" because this is a largely feminine expectation that Milly refuses to accept. Though this is just one example of this refusal, Milly can be viewed as the most mobile, free character in the work because she gets physically outside of Dublin while every other character remains within its confines. Milly finds escape and a chance at a new life within her own solitude. Not only this, but Molly admits "she's right not to ruin her hands," suggesting that Milly may have inspired Molly to think beyond her gendered limitations and deny the forced paralysis Irish patriarchy forces upon women. Much like passed down patriarchal expectations, cloning is the way potatoes are largely produced; as a result, it is easier for them to contract diseases because no new genes are introduced to the potato to create a defense against them ("Potato Genome Project" 1). This parallels to the paralysis of gendered expectations patriarchy clones within men and women, and it takes Milly being created through a new "seed" by leaving Dublin for Molly to be awakened from her own cloned expectations and begin planting her own true beliefs in the readers.

While Molly is the most physically paralyzed character of the work, she has a refreshing and hopeful view of what Joyce and Bloom might originally perceive as an unacceptable stagnation and failure. While Leopold attempts and arguably successfully creates new life out of the loss of his son and his failing marriage, Molly sees beauty and love in the marriage with Leopold, despite its changing nature from what it may originally have been. When she recalls the moment she and Leopold became one in the minutes before their engagement, she recalls, "I gave him the bit of seedcake out of my mouth" (Joyce, *Ulysses* 782). This is not the first time this instance is brought to the readers' attention, as Leopold also remembers the scene with the "seedcake" as being potentially the most intimate moment he had with his wife that he longs to recreate. After giving up part of her "seedcake" to join with Leopold, Molly recalls how she wanted Leopold to finally ask her to marry him. In this way, like Leopold, Molly finds connection and creates a new life with Leopold after first giving up a part of herself to be with him.

While Leopold seemingly considers this connection to exist only in the past, however, Molly brings this connection to the present situation and creates a new connection with readers by utilizing the love and beauty she still perceives in her present but hidden love for Bloom. After Bloom asks Molly to marry him, she says, "yes I said yes I will Yes" (*Ulysses* 783). While thinking about her proposal, Marion seemingly loses her physically present voice and escapes into her own thoughts through an orgasm. In this way, Molly experiences *la petite mort* and loses a part of herself by dreaming of this connection that she once had. Some may say this further shows Molly's disconnect

with her husband in that she does not connect with him in life and rather seeks connection in her affairs; however, the orgasm occurs in the present, portraying that the love that she once had for Leopold is a part of the person she is today. While Leopold almost perceives the love he has for his wife as a blatant impossibility, Molly transforms the love she has for her husband into not only a fantastical connection with him but also the readers in the most intimate, beautifully static way possible.

With Molly's orgasm being the final words of the work, *Ulysses* ends with an all-encapsulating conclusion that draws readers in and allows them to connect truly with a character in the most intimate way possible, but this is not the ending Joyce gave his readers at the finale of his career. Instead, Joyce lefts his readers with *Finnegan's Wake's* ending that takes them directly back to the beginning and offers new life from an ending. Anna Livia Plurabelle fades out of her ending monologue both through her perceived orgasm and imagined death and states, "My leaves have drifted from me. All. But one clings still. I'll bear it on me. To remind me of. Lff!" (*Finnegan's Wake* 628). In other words, as ALP's life and all that matters to her begin to "drift from" her, all that still "clings" to her she "bears" because she values the life she has. As "Lff" almost sounds like life, the text suggests through her impending death that ALP finds beauty and value in the life she had. Implicitly from this, the reader not only sees the progression of ALP into finding value in her own life, but he also witnesses Joyce's final note of progress as an author. While initially Joyce might have seen ALP's ending as a failure, he ends the work with an empathetic acceptance that maybe a well lived, beautiful life is not always one with a grand adventure or a world-changing epiphany. Rather, maybe the tiny moments when a person truly connects with the world in stasis is equally good and beautiful in its own way.

As this work is Joyce's unintentional final goodbye to his readers, it is interesting that the section never actually ends; rather, the ending of both ALP and Joyce's stories take the reader back to the origin of the humanity's story. *Finnegan's Wake* takes the readers back to the origin of sin and defines humanity as the "manroot of all evil" (*Finnegan's Wake* 169). This proves interesting because even when the reader begins to gain knowledge about humanity within Shem the Pen Man's section, Joyce forces them into the first great loss of mankind. The "manroot of all evil" implies Adam and Eve's original sin which made humanity lose its initial innocence but gain the need for God's son to become man and enter the world. In this way, it is through the loss of humanity's innocence that we grow humanity and life, as we know it today, for better or for worse. Not only this, but as Catholicism is such a large part of Joyce's presented Irish identity, this story also holds a large "root"

in getting to the heart of Dublin's culture. "Manroot" appears an interesting way to relate to Adam and Eve's story because it is also a common name for plants with extremely long "roots." In this way, Joyce speaks to the long "roots" and stories of all humanity and how the true nature of humanity and Dublin cannot be told without first going back and recognizing specific moments in the lives of a few humans and how they contribute to the history of a city and mankind.

In this way, Joyce wants to get to "root" or stem of each of his characters in order to get to the heart of humanity. What is interesting, however, is that a potato is a stem. The story of humanity cannot be told with first recognizing Adam and Eve, but the Bible tells us Eve was grown out of Adam's rib to become woman. Through the lacking of Adam's rib, Eve is born, and mankind is created in the lacking that occurs through the losses of innocence and voids throughout an extended line of ancestry. Considering history in this light, no story completely ever ends because it is a culmination of all occurring in the present and all that happened in the past going down to one single "root," stem, potato, or human. For Joyce, *Finnegan's Wake* was unknowingly his final goodbye to readers, but the story never truly ends. His goal was to get to the "root" of all humanity, but he does this not through one single work but in a culmination of all that he wrote in his career. For readers to truly understand humanity in this way, it requires that they understand the authorial "root" which is Joyce himself. Thus, readers must analyze the collection of his stories to understand where he came from, how he developed, and what he admires and is becoming at the end of his life. In other words, if we, as readers, can get to the heart of Joyce as an author, we can see the parts he sacrificed of himself in order to give life to Dublin and greater humanity within his works.

By first understanding the way potatoes creates life out of fragmentation, readers begin to get to the heart of humanity and understand that loss may be essential to understanding love and creating life. Joyce's main goal was to show that if he could get to the heart of Dublin, he could get to the heart of humanity. Joyce being such an intelligent, transformative writer, however, seemingly limits which individuals can benefit from this by making his works so difficult to connect with and understand. Rather, the meaning lies in finding parts of these stories that overlap with the readers own narrative and recognizing that the moments experienced in the life of one man on one day in Dublin can relate to the life of one girl on one day as she reads his novel in her apartment in Denver decades later. Especially reading this work in light of a year of blatant fragmentation within our nation, the concept of the gnomon is ever-present, as individuals scramble to find connection, life, and meaning in a state of perceived hopelessness. Even when a reader may only connect with a few moments in a chapter, perhaps these nuggets of advanced meaning make Joyce so powerful because

they link the reader down to something extremely specific and relatable. While Joyce tackles the seemingly impossible task of linking humanity down to one single city, he goes above and beyond and creates hope for humanity out of a potato: though at first there may be fracture, it is only a matter of time before life and possibility begins to bud.

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