



**“But who was Gerty?”¹
Gerty MacDowell in *Nausicaa***

Molly Allen

Scholars have identified Gerty MacDowell, the central character of the *Nausicaa* episode of Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), as an ephemeral presence in the novel. Thomas Karr Richards observes: 'does not cast a long shadow over Ulysses [...] Seaside girl, child of Mary, window shopper, scamp, seducer, and important victim, Gerty is largely sealed off from the epidemic of disappearances and reappearances that touches every major character in the novel.'² Gerty's character is here compartmentalised into a number of identities, each decidedly 'female,' that together amount to a multifaceted and complex character, yet one who is almost entirely confined to one episode of the novel. Moreover, the reader's perception of Gerty's character is heavily diluted by the narrative structure of *Nausicaa*, as despite the use of the free indirect discourse, as Suzette Henke notes, 'we are not, of course, inside Gerty's consciousness.'³ The reader is not sure if Joyce wishes for them to sympathise with or rebuke her. Therefore, in answering the question posed by the narrator of who this character is, one should consider the many elements of Gerty MacDowell's identity and the roles she is prescribed. This study will focus on three of these categories: the girl-woman, the romantic heroine, and the Holy Virgin - to uncover her greater significance in *Ulysses*. Gerty is presented primarily in terms of sexuality, with ideas about religion, literature and love that are shown to be fickle and arbitrary. She is often contradictory – she is childlike, yet she is a woman, she is a devout Catholic, yet she engages in sexual activity with a stranger - and so Gerty remains elusive and inaccessible. Ultimately, Gerty MacDowell is an important vessel for Joyce's authorial voice. Through Gerty, he flaunts the success of his own narrative style and his departure from nineteenth-century literary tradition, as well as presenting his criticism of social purity standards and the influence of Catholicism on the framework of Irish culture.

The tone of *Nausicaa* can be summed up best in Joyce's own words: 'written in a namby-pamby jammy marmalady drawersy style with effects of incense, mariolatry, masturbation, stewed cockles, painter's palette, chitchat, circumlocutions, etc.'⁴ This narrative style is largely introduced through the shift in narration in which the question is posed, "But who was Gerty?"⁵ – previously in the episode, the omniscient third person narrator describes at relative distance a scene of "three girl friends [who] were seated on the rocks," yet this question deftly sweeps the reader into the free indirect discourse of Gerty's

¹ James Joyce. *Ulysses*. Ed. Jeri Johnson. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) p.333

² Thomas Karr Richards. 'Gerty MacDowell and the Irish Common Reader.' *ELH*, 52:3 (1985) 755-76. (p.755)

³ Suzette Henke. 'Gerty MacDowell: Joyce's Sentimental Heroine.' *Women in Joyce*. Ed. Suzette Henke and Elaine Unkeless. (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1985) p.136

⁴ James Joyce. 'Letter to Frank Budgen, 3 January 1920.' *Selected Letters* 1:135, p.246

⁵ Joyce, *Ulysses*, p.333

**“But who was Gerty?”
Gerty MacDowell in *Nausicaa***

character.⁶ Gerty is “pronounced beautiful by all who knew her,” and as having “a languid queenly hauteur” and “might easily have held her own beside any lady in the land”.⁷ Gerty immediately is placed into the role of the ingenue in a fairytale or romantic novel, seemingly retaining all of the traditional qualities of this character type – beauty, grace, and virtue. This is the ‘marmalady, drawersy’ world that Joyce conjures through his narrative style, ultimately inciting an understanding of Gerty’s consciousness as one that has been highly influenced by the female protagonists of Victorian romantic literature, a world into which she cowers to escape the difficult realities of her life. Henke observes parallels between Joyce’s Gerty MacDowell and Emma Bovary, the female protagonist of Gustave Flaubert’s realist novel *Madame Bovary* (1856):

[...] like Emma Bovary, Gerty interprets the scenario of her life according to the directives of Victorian literature. Her fantasies may be pathetic and futile, but they appear to be crucial to her mental well-being. To shield her wounded sensibilities, Gerty has withdrawn to the comforting shelter of romantic myth.⁸

Just as Emma seeks to escape her provincial existence as the wife of a doctor, Gerty imagines herself into a world untainted by domestic violence, disability, poverty and romantic rejection. The narration carries the reader into Gerty’s romantic reverie filled with daydreams about “old time chivalry” and “weddingbells ringing,”⁹ and we are told how she “loved to read poetry” and “felt that she too could write poetry if she could only express herself like that poem that appealed to her so deeply [...]” and compares her limited romantic experience with Reggie Wylie to “that book the Lamplighter by Miss Cummins, author of Mabel Vaughn and other stories.”¹⁰ Gerty’s preoccupation with romantic literary ideas infiltrates the language used in the narration to a parodical extent; she even wonders why “you couldn’t eat something more poetical like violets or roses”.¹¹ In this way, it can be understood that Joyce, much like Flaubert, uses Gerty’s self-definition as a romantic heroine to demonstrate his own narrative success. Ashley Hope Pérez, in their analysis of Flaubert’s narration in *Madame Bovary*, argues:

[...] Flaubert presents Emma as an incompetent writer so as to highlight the unique accomplishments of his narrative technique. *Madame Bovary* as a showpiece of originality, then, depends for its success on the denigration of a degraded representation of *écriture féminine* as literary practice and performance.¹²

Joyce and Flaubert each use narration to bolster their narrative technique by parodying and henceforth undermining nineteenth-century female literary clichés. In Joyce’s case, he does this by frequently disturbing Gerty’s daydream with elements of reality. No matter how hard she tries to maintain a stream of consciousness, she is visited by unpleasant memories of her childhood - the “deeds of violence” in her home by a father “prey to the fumes of intoxication”, she is a victim of domestic violence, as well as having been rejected by Reggie Wylie, “too young to understand.”¹³ In this way, Gerty’s hope to fit into the identity of romantic heroine is dashed. This is reiterated later on in the episode when the narrative

⁶ Joyce, *Ulysses*, p.331

⁷ Joyce, *Ulysses*, p.333

⁸ Henke, p.134

⁹ Joyce, *Ulysses*, pp.336-40

¹⁰ Joyce, *Ulysses*, pp.347-8

¹¹ Joyce, *Ulysses*, p.337

¹² Ashley Hope Pérez. ‘Against *Écriture Féminine*’: Flaubert’s Narrative Aggression in ‘*Madame Bovary*.’ *French Forum*, 38:3 (2013). 31-47 (p.32)

¹³ Joyce, *Ulysses*, pp.336-9

shifts to Bloom's interior monologue, in which he expresses disappointment when her limp is revealed to him: "Glad I didn't know about it when she was on show."¹⁴ Heather Cook Callow suggests:

Gerty's limp functions symbolically in at least two ways. It symbolises her handicap as a product and a wielder of socially approved "feminine" discourse, but at the same time, the revelation of her "defect" and Bloom's concomitant surprise and dismay provides a paradigm for our own surprise as readers [...]¹⁵

Gerty's limp is not simply a physical disability but is also a device used by Joyce to represent the limitations of the romantic Victorian discourse she so desperately wishes to be part of. Jeri Johnson notes, 'Joyce's loathing of sentimentality and his insistence on an anti-romantic living 'down to facts' have technical as well as thematic significance in his work.'¹⁶ The technical significance of Joyce's desire for realism in his writing is significant here, as Gerty's limp not only makes her physically unable to fit into the identity of the traditional romantic heroine, despite her beauty, but it also is representative of the damage that the consumption of sentimental and romantic discourse has inflicted on her. She can never live up to the standards of femininity that this literature imposes on her because it is not real, and yet she desperately attempts to make it so. Furthermore, the sudden shift to Bloom's focalisation and his implication that he would not have been able to achieve the same level of arousal from Gerty had he been aware of her disability reflects the reader's own interpretation of Gerty MacDowell, as, just like Bloom, Joyce has used narrative style to manipulate our understanding of Gerty as akin to the ingenue of a work of romantic fiction, then subverts this perception.

The publication of *Nausicaa* was deemed to be a direct threat to the fixed standard of morals of the Victorian period, which influenced early twentieth-century social purity laws. The New York Society for the Suppression of Vice published in their annual report of 1920 that, 'a citizen wrote a letter to the District Attorney stating that [*Nausicaa*] had been sent to his young daughter without solicitation,' naming it a culmination of the 'degenerate ideas of an alien' and 'the misuse of good printers' ink.'¹⁷ Katherine Mullin notes that those involved with policing the moral sensibilities of the public, as in the case of the New York Society of the Suppression of Vice, were chiefly concerned with protecting the innocence of the young, who were considered to be, 'vulnerable, suggestible, and in danger from a popular culture social purists perceived to be increasingly sexualised,' and that through his writing, Joyce had violated not only young women such as she who received the illicit copy, but the central character of the episode herself, Gerty MacDowell.¹⁸ Gerty in many ways does appear to be the image of the innocent adolescent. In appearance, she is "as fair a specimen of winsome Irish girlhood as one could wish to see", with a childlike "slight and graceful" figure and a "rosebud mouth" as one might imagine akin to an infant's.¹⁹ Additionally, the language used to reflect Gerty's consciousness also suggests a naïveté and squeamishness on the subject of sex, or indeed anything remotely indelicate. Gerty is physically unable to finish thoughts regarding sex, instead moving on from the subject quickly and quashing any indication of

¹⁴ Joyce, *Ulysses*, p.351

¹⁵ Heather Cook Callow. 'Joyce's Female Voices in 'Ulysses'.' *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, 22:3 (1992). 151-63 (p.156)

¹⁶ Jeri Johnson. "Introduction" in James Joyce, *Ulysses*. p.XXIV

¹⁷ Katherine Mullin. *James Joyce, Sexuality and Social Purity*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) p.140

¹⁸ Mullin, pp.141-2

¹⁹ Joyce, *Ulysses*, p.333

**“But who was Gerty?”
Gerty MacDowell in *Nausicaa***

feelings of desire: “from everything in the least indelicate nature she instinctively recoiled [...] No, no: not that they would be just good friends like a brother and sister without all that other”.²⁰ She seems genuinely naïve about sex, refusing to use correct terminology, preferring to refer to intercourse indirectly as “that” or “the other”, and she seems to desire an emotional intimacy with her admirer that is more in line with a familial relationship rather than sexual intimacy with a lover. Gerty’s signature blush, her “telltale flush”,²¹ reoccurs at the slightest embarrassment; Edy Boardman taunting the toddler, “Gerty is Tommy’s sweetheart”²², eating in public, “when there were any people that made her shy”²³, Cissy Caffrey “saying an unladylike thing”²⁴, and is turned a “burning scarlet” at the knowledge she has “raised the devil” and induced sexual arousal in her onlooker, Bloom.²⁵ Walter Kendrick observes that Gerty’s blushing indicates that there is more to Gerty than this instinctive response suggests, however. He argues that, “[...] genuine innocence cannot be embarrassed by any excess it may come across; genuine innocence never blushes, since blushing implies knowledge of which the blusher is ashamed.”²⁶ Perhaps Gerty is not as naïve as she seems; she has an acute awareness of Bloom’s sexual arousal, and despite her apparent shyness, engages in an erotic flirtation with this stranger and indeed feels her own “whitehot passion” as she reveals to him “a full view high up above her knee”.²⁷ In revealing her body, Gerty reveals a lot more – she reveals that she is aware of her feelings of sexual desire and wishes to act on them. It is again evident, therefore, how Joyce is able to manipulate the reader’s perception of Gerty almost at an instant. We think of Gerty as the innocent and untouched female youth, yet Joyce immediately subverts this idea by making it clear that she is aware of her sexuality. Another revelation is that Gerty is not in fact an adolescent, but a young woman who “would be twentytwo in November,” and yet her appearance and her actions suggest that she is much younger.²⁸ Henke notes:

Joyce tempts us to think of her as a virginal nymphette, a sweet young Lolita barely out of undies [...] but Gerty is no longer an adolescent. We are prepared to accept her as a starry-eyed teenager. Joyce teases us, then deflates our expectations by adding, “but Gerty would never see seventeen again.”²⁹

In this way, Gerty can be described in no more accurate terms than what Joyce has already deemed her – she is a “girl-woman,” a hybrid of both adult sexuality and juvenile naïveté.³⁰ Henke alludes to Vladimir Nabokov’s novel *Lolita* (1955), whose twelve-year-old protagonist Dolores Haze is also categorised as such a hybrid. Nabokov’s difficulties in publishing his novel has bound his and Joyce’s works together – both authors, as noted by John Burt Foster Jr., “[turned] to France to circumvent Anglophone scruples [...]” and he identifies *Ulysses* as *Lolita*’s ‘predecessor.’³¹ Not only is Joyce a predecessor to Nabokov in terms of their publishing history, but Nabokov and Joyce respectively use narrative style to challenge the perceptions of the reader – Nabokov uses his unreliable narrator to manipulate the

²⁰ Joyce, *Ulysses*, p.348

²¹ Joyce, *Ulysses*, p.334

²² Joyce, *Ulysses*, p.333

²³ Joyce, *Ulysses*, p.337

²⁴ Joyce, *Ulysses*, p.338

²⁵ Joyce, *Ulysses*, p.344

²⁶ Walter Kendrick. ‘The Corruption of Gerty MacDowell.’ *James Joyce Quarterly*. 37:3/4. (2000). 413-23 (p.418)

²⁷ Joyce, *Ulysses*, pp.349-50

²⁸ Joyce, *Ulysses*, p.337

²⁹ Henke, p.140

³⁰ Joyce, *Ulysses*, p.342

³¹ John Burt Foster, Jr. ‘Paris.’ *Vladimir Nabokov in Context*, ed. David M. Bethea and Siggy Frank. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). 94-101 (p.98)

reader into thinking of Dolores as a developed, sexual being despite being a child, a technique that Joyce employed before him, in the inverse, by presenting the adult Gerty MacDowell as an innocent youth. Through manipulating the reader's perception of Gerty, Joyce demonstrates that the character has not been 'violated,' but is in fact a vehicle for challenging the social purists' obsession with youth and vulnerability. Gerty is given agency through her sexual interaction with Bloom because she exercises control and awareness of her position as an object of desire as well as being in the position of the admirer, who, as Mullin argues, 'occupies two seemingly irreconcilable positions simultaneously: the actress is also a peeping tom.'³² Gerty is acutely aware of Bloom's eyes on her, "she saw that he saw" and "wasn't ashamed and he wasn't either to look in that immodest way", and so she fits both the role of both the looker and the looked at.³³ Hence, Gerty's identity as a girl-woman allows Joyce to question views on morality and sexuality.

Gerty MacDowell's identity is presented as having been moulded by the directives of Catholicism and its influence on the framework of Irish culture. Joyce had grown up with what Geert Lernout describes as, 'the Church Militant that functioned in Ireland in all but name as an established church [...],' the church that in 1904 he declared to 'make open war upon [...] by what I write and say and do.'³⁴ In *Nausicaa*, the contradiction of Gerty's Mariolatry and her sexual behaviour is Joyce's authorial weapon against the sanctimony and hypocrisy of the Catholic doctrine. Gerty, throughout *Nausicaa*, is directly aligned with the Virgin Mary. The description of her appearance conjures images of a Renaissance Madonna; "the waxen pallor of her face" and its "ivorylike purity," and her hands "of finely veined alabaster" are a physical representation of her Catholicism. In the same way as the classical image of the Virgin Mary in western art, she is defined by her whiteness, a manifestation of the cleanliness of her soul as a result of her devotion, untainted by other beliefs or religions, by which the slightest blemish or stain on her soul would be immediately visible.³⁵ Gerty declares blue to be "her own colour", appropriating the traditional clothing of Mary, who is shrouded in blue cloth so as to become the human manifestation of the Ark of the Covenant and the word of God.³⁶ Gerty's identity is presented, then, as inextricably connected to her virginity. She reveres Mary as "Holy Virgin of virgins", inducting herself through her virginity into the cult of Mary, heightening her ability to self-identify as a model Catholic young woman.³⁷ However, Gerty does not only wear the colour blue because she wishes to self-identify as a modern Madonna, but for the other, more materialistic, reason of its being in fashion. The "electric blue" blouse she wears is chosen because "it was expected in the Lady's Pictorial that electric blue would be worn", demonstrating that perhaps Gerty prioritises earthly possessions and indulging her vanity over her Catholic devotion.³⁸ Gerty's piety and her fixation on being up to date with the latest styles seems contradictory, but the magazine world of rules and instructions is not largely distant from Catholic doctrine for Gerty: Both give her a set of strict rules, codes, and guides for her behaviour that she can follow to make herself into the kind of woman Irish Catholic society demanded. Sociologist Cara Delay suggests, 'newspapers and magazines, instruction and etiquette manuals,

³² Mullin, p.161

³³ Joyce, *Ulysses*, p.350

³⁴ Geert Lernout. 'Religion.' *James Joyce in Context*. Ed. John McCourt. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). 322-43 (p.332)

³⁵ Joyce, *Ulysses*, p.333

³⁶ Joyce, *Ulysses*, p.335

³⁷ Joyce, *Ulysses*, p.338

³⁸ Joyce, *Ulysses*, p.335

**“But who was Gerty?”
Gerty MacDowell in *Nausicaa***

conduct books, and Catholic doctrinal and devotional works [...] presented the model Irish woman as the rural domestic angel.³⁹ The battle between Gerty’s material and religious desires underpin this episode as a whole. Despite Gerty’s rampant Mariolatry, “she knew who came first and after Him the blessed Virgin”, she is also devoted to the instruction of women’s magazines, following just as religiously as the Word of God the advice of “Madame Vera Verity, directress of the Woman Beautiful page of the Princess Novelette [...]”.⁴⁰ Timo Müller suggests that Gerty is not as pious as she first appears, but rather that, ‘she follows the rules because it is expected of her, even though she does not seem to agree with the underlying principles: she will not have sex before marriage because she would not receive absolution for it.’⁴¹ Gerty may fashion herself in the image of the ultimate Virgin, but manipulates her understanding of Catholic teaching to allow herself to fulfil her desires. She imagines her seduction of Bloom as “altogether different because she could almost feel him draw her face to his [...] Besides there was absolution so long as you didn’t do the other thing before being married and there ought to be female priests that would understand [...]”.⁴² Hence, it is through Gerty’s character that Joyce is able to demonstrate his criticisms of Catholic teachings surrounding sex by presenting the ideology as hypocritical. Central to this is Joyce’s exploration of what is identified as the technic of the episode in the Gilbert Schema: tumescence and detumescence.⁴³ As Bloom’s sexual arousal piques, the sound of the choir singing the Blessed Sacrament “Laudate Dominum Omnes Gentes [Praise the Lord, all you nations]” forms the backdrop of the setting, and his ejaculation is reached as “a rocket sprang and bang shot blind” and “the Holy Roman Candle burst” before “all went silent”.⁴⁴ The alignment of Bloom’s sexual climax with the literal climax of the church service subverts the traditional teachings of Catholicism - while the church seeks to suppress and silence sexual desire, Joyce uses it to fuel the eroticism of Gerty and Bloom’s interaction.

Gerty MacDowell may be a fleeting presence in *Ulysses*, but her identity is undoubtedly varied and multifaceted. Joyce continuously challenges the reader’s perception of Gerty by presenting her in a series of contradictions, encouraging one to think of her as one thing – be it sentimental heroine, virgin or good Catholic girl – and immediately challenging this; the technique of tumescence and detumescence is not only present in Joyce’s writing, therefore, but also in the experience of reading *Nausicaa*. Joyce’s narrative structure in which the free indirect discourse of Gerty uses language reflective of Victorian romantic literature, a world in which the beautiful Gerty seems to be the perfect fit, yet her physical disability and inability to escape thoughts of her real life domestic struggles demonstrates that this world is but a fantasy into which Gerty retreats. Joyce also allows the reader to think that Gerty is an innocent adolescent and devout Catholic, completely naïve about physical desire and sex, yet reveals her to be an adult who gains a level of agency through her sexuality, challenging ideas about social purity, youth and religion. Through Gerty MacDowell and her varied identity, Joyce shows the successes of his narrative style and his disdain for sentimental discourse, as well as presenting his criticism of residual

³⁹ Cara Delay, “‘Uncharitable Tongues’: Women and Abusive Language in Early Twentieth-Century Ireland.” *Feminist Studies*, 39:3 (2013). 628-53 (p.635)

⁴⁰ Joyce, *Ulysses*, p.334

⁴¹ Timo Müller. ‘Gerty MacDowell, Poetess: Butler’s ‘The Authoress of the Odyssey’ and the Nausicaa Episode of ‘Ulysses’.’ *Twentieth Century Literature*. 55:3 (2009). 378-92 (p.384)

⁴² Joyce, *Ulysses*, p.349

⁴³ Joyce, *Ulysses*, p.734

⁴⁴ Joyce, *Ulysses*, pp.348-50

Molly Allen

nineteenth-century moral standards and the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church regarding sexuality.

**“But who was Gerty?”
Gerty MacDowell in *Nausicaa***

Bibliography

- Cook Callow, Heather. ‘Joyce’s Female Voices in ‘Ulysses’.’ *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, 22:3 (1992). pp.151-63. Accessed 28 Oct. 2022.
- Delay, Cara. “‘Uncharitable Tongues’”: Women and Abusive Language in Early Twentieth-Century Ireland.’ *Feminist Studies*, 39:3 (2013). pp.628-53.
- Foster, Jr., John Burt. ‘Paris.’ *Vladimir Nabokov in Context*, ed. David M. Bethea and Siggie Frank. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp.94-101.
- Henke, Suzette. ‘Gerty MacDowell: Joyce’s Sentimental Heroine.’ *Women in Joyce*. Ed. Suzette Henke and Elaine Unkeless. (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1985). pp.132-50.
- Joyce, James. ‘Letter to Frank Budgen, 3 January 1920.’ *Selected Letters*, 1:135. p.246.
- Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. Ed. Jeri Johnson. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- Karr Richards, Thomas. ‘Gerty MacDowell and the Irish Common Reader.’ *ELH*, 52:3 (1985) pp.755-76. Accessed 3 Jan. 2023.
- Kendrick, Walter. ‘The Corruption of Gerty MacDowell.’ *James Joyce Quarterly*. 37:3/4. (2000) pp.413-23.
- McCourt, John. *James Joyce in Context*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
- Müller, Timo. ‘Gerty MacDowell, Poetess: Butler’s ‘The Authoress of the Odyssey’ and the Nausicaa Episode of ‘Ulysses’.’ *Twentieth Century Literature*. 55:3. (2009). pp.378-92. Accessed 11 Nov. 2022.
- Mullin, Katherine. “James Joyce, Sexuality and Social Purity.” (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- Pérez, Ashley Hope. “‘Against Écriture Féminine’: Flaubert’s Narrative Aggression in ‘Madame Bovary’.’ *French Forum*, 38:3 (2013). pp.31-47. Accessed 5 Jan. 2023.