

# The Cracked Looking Glass of a Servant Mirroring Sins and Scandals: James Joyce's Reception of Oscar Wilde\*

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“Hurrah for Ireland! Poor Wilde was Irish and so am I.” According to Richard Ellmann, on 29 April 1918, James Joyce said this in the midst of the applause at the end of the first performance of Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) by the English Players, a theatrical group Joyce formed and for which he worked as business manager (Joyce 426). As the anecdote suggests, Joyce identified himself with Wilde, seeing him not as Anglo-Irishman but as the same poor Irishman. This paper discusses two aspects Joyce shared with Wilde: 1) their art theories—they desired to be independent artists, rejecting restrictions and controls on art and artist; and 2) the subject matters of their works—their art, inevitably impaired by others, reflects people’s sins and scandals. Although Joyce only occasionally mentioned Wilde in his life and work, closely reading his remarks on Wilde shows the manner in which Joyce reflected Wilde’s life and art onto his own life and art.

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The following scene from the Telemachus episode of Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), where Buck Mulligan, a medical student, holds a cracked mirror up to Stephens Dedalus, a would-be artist, is full of references to Wilde. Reading the scene carefully will clarify how Joyce compared himself with Wilde and his art with Wilde’s art:

—Look at yourself, he [Mulligan] said, you dreadful bard [Stephen]!

Stephen bent forward and peered at the mirror held out to him, cleft by a crooked crack. . . . Who chose this face for me? This dogsbody to rid of vermin. . . .

—I pinched it out of the skivvy’s room, Buck Mulligan said. . . .

Laughing again, he brought the mirror away from Stephen's peering eyes.  
 —The rage of Caliban at not seeing his face in a mirror, he said. If Wilde were only alive to see you!

Drawing back and pointing, Stephen said with bitterness:  
 —It is a symbol of Irish art. The cracked lookingglass of a servant. (*U* 1.134-46)<sup>1</sup>

Mulligan ridicules Stephen's disagreeable face, referring to Wilde and borrowing expressions from the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890): "The nineteenth century dislike of Realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass. The nineteenth century dislike of Romanticism is the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass" (3: 167).<sup>2</sup> Then, Stephen, taking this in an artistic sense, replies by using a phrase from "The Decay of Lying" (1889): "I [Cyril] can quite understand your [Vivian's] objection to art being treated as a mirror. You think it would reduce genius to the position of a cracked looking-glass" (4: 90). Stephen adds "of a servant" to the phrase the "cracked looking-glass" and calls it "a symbol of Irish art." For what reasons can "the cracked lookingglass of a servant" be "a symbol of Irish art?"

Considering the part Stephen adds to Cyril's phrase, critics often read this scene at the beginning of *Ulysses* in the context of colonialism in Ireland, not in the context of Wilde. Len Platt, for example, focuses on "an insistent and complex representation of divided class and racial identities" which exists at the centre of the tension between Mulligan and Stephen (50). The Anglophilic Mulligan is "plump" and "stately" (*U* 1.1) with golden teeth, whereas Stephen, an Irish Catholic, is malnourished with rotten teeth and described as "a dogsbody" (*U* 1.112, 1.137) and "a servant" to Mulligan (*U* 1.146, 1.312). Platt also indicates that Mulligan's jibe that Stephen is like Caliban and the manner in which Stephen reacts to this jibe recall the "centuries of cultural imperialism which had stamped on English minds an indelible image of native Irish primitiveness" (52).<sup>3</sup> This colonial context explains why "the cracked lookingglass of a servant" is a symbol of Irish art, but still it does not illustrate why for Stephen "*the cracked lookingglass of a servant*" symbolises Irish art (*italics mine*).

To find the key to answering the question, we should first notice what the symbolic mirror, or looking glass, meant for Wilde and Joyce. Before them, mirrors were largely employed by Pre-Raphaelites. They depicted mundane mirrors which clearly reflect things

in a room and magic mirrors such as in *Lady Lilith* by Dante Gabriel Rossetti or *The Lady of Shalott* by William Holman Hunt. They had a considerable influence on Wilde, who loved the Pre-Raphaelites. In “The Decay of Lying,” Wilde, from the viewpoint of Vivian, insists that “Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life” and that “She [Art] is a veil, rather than a mirror” (4: 89-90). For Wilde, a mirror, or a looking glass, meant realistic art, which he judges as “a complete failure” (4: 102). Joyce similarly treats realistic art as a mirror; however, he desires his art to mirror things realistically, unlike Wilde. Joyce employed the word “looking-glass” in his 23 June 1906 letter to Grant Richards, a publisher, in which he defended his collection of short stories, *Dubliners* (1914), and commented on the suggestions made by Richards and the printer working with him in a previous letter:

Your suggestion that those concerted in the publishing of *Dubliners* may be prosecuted for indecency is in my opinion an extraordinary contribution to the discussion. I know that some amazing imbecilities have been perpetrated in England but I really cannot see how any civilised tribunal could listen for two minutes to such an accusation against my book. I care little or nothing whether what I write is indecent or not but, if I understand the meaning of words, I have written nothing whatever indecent in *Dubliners*.

. . . It is not my fault that the odour of ashpits and old weeds and offal hangs round my stories. I seriously believe that you will retard the course of civilization in Ireland by preventing the Irish people from having one good look at themselves in my nicely polished looking-glass. (*L* 1: 63-64)<sup>4</sup>

Seeing *Dubliners* as his “nicely polished looking-glass” mirroring the paralysis of Irish citizens, Joyce turned down Richards’ suggestion to correct the seemingly indecent parts of the book—in other words, he rejected the cracks Richards and the printer tried to impose on his mirror. He also kept his art from being subjected to the whims of popular taste. In “The Day of the Rabblement” (1901), while opposing the parochialism of the Irish Literary Theatre, Joyce argued that an artist should be independent of popular spirit: “If an artist courts the favour of the multitude he cannot escape the contagion of its fetishism and deliberate self-deception, and if he joins in a popular movement he does so at his own risk” (*W* 51).<sup>5</sup> Therefore, “the cracked lookingglass of a servant,” presented at

the opening scene of *Ulysses*, arguably reflecting the artistic distress of the young Joyce, symbolises Irish art in a subjugated position where it is easily manipulated by printers, publishers, popular voices, and others factors. As Margot Gayle Backus argues, Irish writers were also in a scandalous position within British print capitalism which “cause[d] those who attempt[ed] to portray the world through Irish eyes to seem like incompetent artists who [were] deviating from what the English newspaper readers and indeed most Irish readers mis[took] for unbiased reality” (*Scandal* 21-23).

Even though Joyce and Wilde reacted differently towards the symbolic looking glass, Joyce realised that Wilde, like himself, had also detested any restrictions or unfavourable influence on art and artists. In his letter to the editor of *The Scots Observer* on 9 July 1890, for instance, Wilde opposed the reviewer’s opinion that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was intended to be read by “the most depraved members of the criminal and illiterate classes” (*CL* 438):<sup>6</sup>

The pleasure that one has in creating a work of art is a purely personal pleasure, and it is for the sake of this pleasure that one creates. The artist works with his eye on the object. Nothing else interests him. What people are likely to say does not even occur to him. He is fascinated by what he has in hand. He is indifferent to others. I write because it gives me the greatest possible artistic pleasure to write. If my work pleases the few I am gratified. If it does not, it causes me no pain. As for the mob, I have no desire to be a popular novelist. It is far too easy.

Your critic then, Sir, commits the absolutely unpardonable crime of trying to confuse the artist with his subject-matter. For this, Sir, there is no excuse at all. . . . (*CL* 439).

This letter conceivably elicited Joyce’s sympathy for Wilde’s aloofness from the public mind, for Joyce actually read the letter well enough to quote a few lines of it in his essay “Oscar Wilde: The Poet of ‘Salomé’” (1909). He also enjoyed reading Wilde’s “The Soul of Man under Socialism” (1891), in which Wilde argues, on the one hand, for the various benefits of socialism, such as the cultivation of people’s individualism, self-understanding, self-development, and especially, devotion to art; and on the other hand, against factors that impose limitations on the artist, such as authority, public

opinion, press, and journalism (4: 254-56). Joyce liked this essay so much that he wrote to Wilde's literary executor, Robert Ross, asking for permission to translate it into Italian and publish it. Regrettably, he could not find a publisher (Bowker 176).

While learning from Wilde's rebuff of any limitations on art and artist, Joyce occasionally even expressed a wish that the works of Wilde would mirror things more clearly, like a nicely polished looking glass. After he finished reading *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Joyce wrote in a letter to his young brother on 16 August 1906, when he was still corresponding with Grant Richards to settle the problems concerning *Dubliners*, that "Wilde seems to have had some intentions in writing it—some wish to put himself before the world—but the book is rather crowded with lies and epigrams. If he had had the courage to develop allusions in the book it might have been better. I suspect he has done this in some privately-printed books" (*L* 2: 150); thus, Joyce treated *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a mirror, like his *Dubliners*, and expressed a wish that Wilde had depicted his homosexuality more openly in the novel.<sup>7</sup> Joyce guessed, correctly, that Victorian authorities and publishers had pressured Wilde to conceal homosexual contexts in the form of insinuations. Of course, Joyce knew from history that after Wilde became entrapped in the plot of the Marquess of Queensberry and caused a scandal, the allusions in his works became public, damaging his art. Cyril's line in "The Decay of Lying"—"Treating art as a mirror would reduce genius to the position of a cracked looking-glass"—ironically predicts the course that Wilde's art, and Wilde himself, followed. Therefore, Irish art as "the cracked lookingglass of a servant" represents arts mirroring scandalous life so blatantly or allusively as to consequently invite censors or negative reviews or to cause a scandal, like the works of Wilde and Joyce.

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Joyce empathised not only with Wilde's distress in keeping his art away from obstacles but also with his tendency to commit sins and cause scandals through his art. In his essay "Oscar Wilde: The Poet of 'Salomé'" (1909), which he wrote after the first performance in Trieste of Richard Strauss's *Salomé*, Joyce discusses Wilde's miserable life and his sinful art, finding his own personality in Wilde. At the beginning, Joyce associates Wilde with a descendant of King Fingal named Oscar, calling Wilde a dishonoured exile like himself: "Like that savage tribe he too was to break the lance of his paradoxical eloquence against the ranks of useful conventions and, exiled and dishonoured, to hear the chorus of the righteous men recite his name along with that of

the unclean spirit” (W 148). Joyce also regards Wilde as a poor Irishman who was sadly perceived as a laughingstock by the English people and culture—which is close to how Joyce felt he himself was viewed. Wilde found wealth and success only when he became a traditional Irish comic playwright—a “court jester to the English” (W 149); however, on hearing the news of his condemnation, a crowd collected in front of the courthouse and danced for joy as newspaper journalists fed on “the spectacle of his shame” through the window of his cell (W 149). For Joyce, however, Wilde was far from “a monster of perversion that inexplicably arose in the midst of the modern civilization of England” but “the logical and inevitable product of the Anglo-Saxon college and university system, a system of seclusion and secrecy” (W 150). Joyce also recognises people’s hesitation to judge Wilde as a criminal, citing from the aforementioned letter Wilde wrote to the editor of *The Scots Observer*, “Each man writes his own sin into *Dorian Gray* . . . . What Dorian Gray’s sin was no one says and no one knows. He who discovers it has committed it” (W 151). He concludes by asserting that the main theme of Wilde’s art is sin, relating it to the Catholic spirit that “man cannot reach the divine heart across that sense of separation and loss that is called sin” (W 151).

Hence, it is no wonder that while reflecting on Wilde’s life and art, *Ulysses*’ Stephen feels distressed by a sense of sin and describes people’s sins and scandals in his art as the cracked looking glass mirrors his scandalous Caliban-like face. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), Stephen succumbs to the temptation of a prostitute, but after attending a Catholic retreat, he is tormented by a sense of guilt. He leaves Ireland at the end of the novel, wishing to free himself from his home, fatherland, and church (P 208), and to express the distress caused by his living conditions—flying by the nets of “nationality, language, religion” (P 171).<sup>8</sup> In *Ulysses*, however, Stephen is back in Ireland without achieving his dream and instead feels a pang of conscience for not having prayed for his Catholic mother on her deathbed. Stephen thus faces Catholicism after weltering in sin or wandering, just as Wilde returned to it after his conviction, imprisonment, and exile. Later, in the Scylla and Charybdis episode of *Ulysses*, Stephen treats sin and scandal as subject matters of his art. Based on a private secret scandal involving Shakespeare—a popular belief that his wife Anne had an affair with his brother Richard—Stephen reads *Hamlet* as a ghost story mirroring Shakespeare’s scandal, regarding King Hamlet as Shakespeare, Gertrude as Anne, Claudius as Richard, and Prince Hamlet as Shakespeare’s son, Hamnet. When Wilde’s *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* (1889) is brought

up in conversation, he also calls Shakespeare's supposed homosexual love for Mr. W. H. as "Love that dare not speak its name" (9.659), borrowing the expression from Wilde's poem to Alfred Douglas. Stephen believes Shakespeare was intentionally involved in such sins and scandals, for "[a] man of genius makes no mistakes" and "[h]is errors are volitional and are the portals of discovery" (9.228-29). In this way, Stephen, who holds to "the now, the here, through which all future plunges to the past" (9.89), accepts the sins and scandals of his own and of people in the past to update himself on many occasions: "I, entelechy, form of forms, am I by memory because under everchanging forms. I that sinned and prayed and fasted. . . . I, I and I. I." (9.209-12).

In the Nestor episode in *Ulysses*, when Garrett Deasy, a Protestant Unionist, tells him that Jewish people "sinned against the light" (2.361), Stephen answers, "Who has not?" defending Jews (2.375). For Stephen, the other main character of *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom, the Irish Jew who carries serious sins and scandals on his shoulders, therefore, potentially appears to be an intriguing subject matter. Born to a Hungarian Jewish father, Rudolf Virág, and an Irish Protestant mother, Ellen Higgins, Bloom is subjected to icy stares from Irish citizens. His father poisoned himself to death, and his son, Rudy, died on the eleventh day of his birth. Additionally, his wife, Molly, has an affair with Blazes Boylan, which reduces his chances for having another child. However, despite these sad facts, he is occasionally so optimistic as to voluntarily perform scandalous deeds such as exchanging sadomasochistic letters with Martha Clifford under the pseudonym Henry Flower and indulging in masturbation on Sandymount Strand while looking at a young woman, Gerty MacDowell. Joyce described Bloom as a similar scandalous figure to Wilde. In the Calypso episode, Bloom folds out a newspaper in a jakes at the backyard of his house, finding a titbit, *Mateham's Masterstroke* by Mr Philip Beaufoy, easy to read; then, he relieves his bowels and wipes his bottom with the paper. Later, in the dreamy Circe Episode, after being repudiated by the women he met during the day, including Martha and Gerty, Bloom is taken to an illusory court, where the author of the titbit, Beaufoy, appears and presents the smeared paper as a specimen of his "maturer work disfigured by the hallmark of the beast" (15.844-45). As Backus points out, the excrement-marked newspaper recalls the stained bed sheets at the Savoy hotel room, which were presented to the court as the evidence of Wilde's sexual perversion (*Scandal* 206).<sup>9</sup> To countercharge the women's claim, Bloom, holding a full-blown water lily, delivers a "long unintelligible speech" stressing his innocence and his intention to be

rehabilitated, only to invite laughter from listeners (15.899). The water lily he holds recalls the flower Wilde inserted into the neck of the coat he wore at the trial, and his unsubstantial speech reminds us of Wilde's witty but windy speech soliciting listeners' laughter. After the speech, the women start to complain about Bloom for his action of sending scandalous letters to them, and disclose the letters to the court. These private letters recall Wilde's letter to Alfred Douglas, which was read out in court.

Unsurprisingly, such descriptions of Bloom's private scandals in *Ulysses* invited strict censorship from publishers and authorities, causing a scandal about *Ulysses* in the real world; however, Joyce managed to come through the scandal with tact. In March 1918, *The Little Review* started serial publication of *Ulysses*; US Postal Authorities confiscated the January and May issues in 1919 and the January and July-August issues in 1920—the last of which contains the masturbation scene in the Nausicaa Episode. On 20 September 1920, the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice lodged an official complaint against *The Little Review*. Finally, in 1921, the editors of *The Little Review* were convicted of publishing obscenity, and publication of *Ulysses* ceased. However, soon after, in 1922 *Ulysses* was published as a book at the Shakespeare and Company in Paris with the support of the owner of the bookstore, Sylvia Beach—although there is no evidence, the scandal Wilde faced in London might have inspired Joyce to promptly change the place of publication of his own novel to Paris, where restrictions on art and artists were less strict.<sup>10</sup> A famous photograph, showing Joyce and Beach at her work desk examining *Ulysses*' order notes, was taken in the bookstore at the end of 1922. As Sean Latham explains, in the photograph, Joyce sits resolutely with his back against an advertisement for *The Sporting Times*, proclaiming “The Scandal of Ulysses,” which hovers on the wall like an advertisement poster for *Ulysses* (89). This stately look of Joyce symbolically indicates that the complaint that *Ulysses* is obscene did not sadden him but rather encouraged him to take it as a good opportunity to promote his book. It is also worth noting that Joyce completed the Circe Episode, including the illusory court scene, after *Ulysses* was called obscene and before the court judgement was given. Therefore, it appears that Joyce decided to write about Bloom's scandal in the world of the novel before his book itself was condemned as a scandalous book in the real world. By judging Bloom at the court, Joyce arguably tarnished—or developed a crack on—his own work. Unlike *Dubliners*, his nicely polished looking glass, *Ulysses* is the cracked looking glass of a servant that mirrors sins and scandals.



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To sum up, Joyce emulated Wilde by working people's sins and scandals into his art while struggling to free himself and his art from any obstructions. Joyce wrote *Dubliners* as a nicely polished looking glass, but it experienced a long period of censorship and was stigmatised as an obscene work by publishers. At the symbolic opening scene of *Ulysses*, Joyce recollects this time of hardship by comparing himself and his art with Wilde and Wilde's art. In *Ulysses*, Joyce depicted Stephen as an artist who commits and depicts sins and scandals and Bloom as a seriously sinful and scandalous figure, inevitably causing a scandal in the real world. However, Joyce quickly changed the place of publication of *Ulysses* to Paris and wrote a scene in his book in which Bloom was judged in an illusory court for his sins and scandals, effectively tarnishing, or "cracking" his own book, or "mirror." *Ulysses* is, therefore, the cracked looking glass of a servant, that is Joyce, that mirrors sins and scandals.

#### Notes

- \* This paper is based on a presentation I gave on 29 November 2014 at the 39th annual meeting of the Oscar Wilde Society of Japan. Revisions and further information were added.
- 1 James Joyce, *Ulysses* (abbreviated as *U*), ed. Hans Walter Gabler (New York: Vintage, 1986). Regarding the quotations from *Ulysses*, episode and line numbers rather than page numbers are given in parentheses.
- 2 Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (abbreviated as *CW*), 7 vols, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000-13).
- 3 The caricature in *Punch* (19 March 1870) depicts the Irish as Caliban, as the savage. With the title "The Irish 'Tempest,'" Caliban's line from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is cited under the cartoon: "This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother, which thou tak'st from me."
- 4 James Joyce, *The Letters of James Joyce* (abbreviated as *L*), Vol. 1, ed. Stuart Gilbert (London: Faber, 1957), Vol. 2 and 3, ed. Richard Ellmann (London: Faber, 1966).
- 5 James Joyce, *Occasional, Critical, and Political Writing* (abbreviated as *W*), ed. Kevin Barry (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008).
- 6 Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde* (abbreviated as *CL*), ed. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (New York: Henry Holt, 2000).
- 7 About the quoted part of the letter, Ellmann explains that "he [Joyce] picked up Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in an Italian translation, and complained that Wilde had veiled

- the homosexual implications. . . . Wilde, like most of the authors he now read, was not toughminded enough” (*Joyce* 233).
- 8 James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (abbreviated as *P*), ed. Jeri Johnson (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008).
- 9 As Backus argues, when Stephen hands Deasy’s paper to Crawford, the editor of *the Freeman’s Journal*, he says to Stephen, noticing a torn page in it, “Who tore it? Was he short taken?” (*U* 7:521), implying that Stephen presumably wiped himself with the tatter; however, in truth, he tore it to write a poem on it. Thus, Crawford regards Stephen’s art as evidence to prove his scandalous propensity, just as the smeared bed sheet at the Savoy Hotel (*Scandal* 152).
- 10 In “Oscar Wilde: The Poet of ‘Salomé,’” Joyce regretted Wilde’s persistence in remaining in England after causing a scandal: “His greatest crime was to have caused in England a scandal; it is well known that the English authorities did all they could to persuade him to flee before issuing an arrest warrant against him” (*W* 150).

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