Addressing a Shortcoming in Corporeal Objectivity

James Joyce employs unique literary techniques in his modern novel, *Ulysses*, to advance and develop the narrative nature of the novel. Corporeality, the experience of living in a human body or in a bodily form, is expressed through intertwined pieces of represented speech and thought, the free indirect discourse that represents each character’s individual consciousness. The corporeal existence highlights material and carnal obsessions and establishes a contrast between the actual human reactions of life. But by weaving the peculiar speech and thought to the living experience in a body, Joyce is able to highlight and solve a gap between the human state of mind and the body. The purpose of the paper is to examine the new form of narrative that allows Joyce to depict actions of the body without limiting portrayals of the individual character’s corporal experience as described through his represented speech and thought. But at the same time, this imparts an increased relatability for the reader to the two juxtaposed extremes which I think conveys an ironic exaggeration, through representation in epic proportions, of the mundane bodily sensations and sheds light on the flawed natural human tendency to be distracted by self-centered opinions and manipulated by material objectification and desire. In order to show this impact of Joyce’s advanced narrative on the bodily experience, I will compare the juxtaposed represented speech and thought in Bloom’s objective corporeality and Stephen’s subjective corporeality to determine how their contrasting connections to the external world leads to varied human body experiences. But by representing uniquely the extreme cases of each form of corporeality in almost epic and gargantuan proportions, Joyce not only achieves a new form of
narrative but also introduces an all-encompassing idea of the experience of living in a human body.

A subjective form of corporeality would imply the overarching emphasis on the personal self and the continuous dependence of the individual on his internal thoughts and his perceived outlook on his surroundings to support his existence. Here, objects in surroundings are related to through the impact on the self. Stephen Dedalus, a primary protagonist in *Ulysses*, is largely defined through an exaggerated portrayal of his self-centered nature through represented speech and thought that depicts a focus on his subjective corporeality. Under subjective corporeality, the human bodily experience revolves around being highly self-concerned and focused on the impact of various aspects on one’s mind. Stephen’s thought process following the death of his mother is portrayed more as an internal conflict whereby any sentiments of grief and remorse are extremely overshadowed by Stephen’s focus on his own mental state of being. Despite the initial triggering sensation of “pain, that was not yet the pain of love” (Joyce 1103) that “fretted his heart,” his feeble mind is quickly distracted by a natural tendency towards the impact of his surroundings upon himself. The mundane sensations inspired from the smell of “wax and rosewood […] a faint odour of wetted ashes,” the sound of her “mute, reproachful” breath and “fits of loud groaning vomiting” along with the gross pictorial imagination of the “green sluggish bile which she had torn up from her rotting liver” all imply an effect upon Stephen that is more centered towards the impact upon his eyes, nose and ears rather than the internal pain of loss (104-110). This continual emphasis that Stephen’s mind directs towards his own bodily feelings at his mother’s deathbed highlights one of the two extreme ends of the spectrum of corporeality. The memory of his mother is initiated during his shaving ritual in the morning and emphasizes the impact minute details in conversation with Buck Milligan have on his mindset. The
inevitable trigger of pain is reflected in Stephen’s thoughts due to the collaborative impact of Haines’ “indigestion” (53) and nightly “raving and moaning” (61), Buck Milligan’s incessant desire to teach the Greeks, which he remarks as “[their] great sweet mother” (80), the “silence” (99) in which he shaves along with the handkerchief’s “snotgreen” color and taste (73-78). Stephen’s body and corporal existence serves simply as a means for these sensations to strike his mind and his body’s encounters with aspects in the surroundings have the power to spur up similar experiences from his memory. This process is largely assisted by his subjective view of the world whereby his body registers self-impacting sensory physical cues and the majority of his contemplative thoughts are deviated towards these elements as reflected in his represented speech and thought. Stephen’s perception of the past and the present is based heavily on the impact the mundane, but highly detail oriented, physical characteristics of the setting have on him. The same pattern of silence, grotesque combination of visuals and smells repeats in his dreams (270) without carrying any more emotional weight highlighting exactly the limitations in Stephen’s corporeal experience. Joyce is able to shed light on this human weakness as the reader is better able to somewhat relate to the complex thought process that leads to such rudimentary imagery and sensory sensations taking prominence in Stephen’s mind. The amplified nature of these senses upon the human body extends Joyce’s ironic commentary on the epic nature of the human body.

Leopold Bloom, another central protagonist, embodies a very contrasting state of mind compared to Stephen as his represented speech and thought portray a continual focus on objectification. Especially to an exaggerated version where the distinction between a human and an inanimate object ceases to exist. Represented speech and thought serves as the means of gaining insight into the predominant mindset of the individual and this juxtaposition of Stephen’s
and Bloom’s contrasting exaggerations advances Joyce’s encompassing experiment with both aspects of corporeality. Unlike Stephen, whose existence in the human body revolves around long-lasting and detail centered triggers that constantly resurface due to the obsession with oneself, Bloom’s objectifying human experience channels energy towards material worth and is distracted by the temporary resemblances between objects and often between a person and an object. His essence of bodily existence is easily appealed by the physical characteristics of the object and anything remotely analogous is quickly regarded in the same frame of thought. The image of the sausages as “shiny links, packed with forcemeat, fed his gaze and he breathed in tranquilly” collocated at the meat shop with the “nextdoor girl” inspires a stream of subconscious associations between the whacking of a carpet on the clothesline and the way “her crooked skirt swings at each whack,” and between the pork butcher’s “blotchy fingers” and the sausage pink (4142-153). This degradation of the girl’s movements accompanied by an almost personified carpet brings the contrast between Bloom and Stephen to the forefront. “The crooked skirt swinging, whack by whack by whack” (164) is a representation of the lack of connection between his surroundings and Bloom himself. His body may be compelled to act upon such external impulses (as I will examine next) but the image itself does not register strongly into Bloom’s mind. He is emotionally moved and repeatedly attached neither to the scene before him nor to the immediate impact that the resemblance between the meat, the carpet and the human body have upon his sensory triggers. Instead, he is grappling with the momentary scene before him because his objectifying corporeality prevents any permeation of the image onto his frame of mind. His connection to the outside world through his body exists for the instant the object comes across him, that is, the instant “his eyes [rest] on her vigorous hips” (143). His focus upon eating the slightly burned meat, when he get back home later, is directed solely on “his mouth,
chewing with discernment the toothsome pliant meat” (391) and does not deviate towards the memory of the scene at the butcher’s shop as the earlier objectified juxtaposition of the meat and the human body has not registered a sensory clue like it often does in the case of Stephen’s self-based subjective corporeality.

Objective corporeality, in Bloom’s case as shown by his represented speech and thought, serves as a barrier between his internal thoughts and the experience of living in his body because the object-based outlook ensures that his body can react independently of his own mental state of mind. Bloom’s human body is separated from the thought process that the reader sees in represented speech and thought primarily due to the lack of impact any object or person objectified has on his own self. This paves the way for the body to respond to the impression of these objects without much dictation from his mind and this outlook of looking at features in the surroundings as mere objects leaves his corpus as the primary, and often the only, mode of interaction with the surroundings. This aspect of the Bloom’s bodily experience is highlighted repeatedly and Joyce breaks the represented speech and thought narrative to focus on the lack of connection between Bloom’s consciousness and parts of his body. While his mind is still distracted towards the girl at the meat shop, the narrative course changes from his own desires to what his body needs to do. He ponders internally whether “to catch up and walk behind her if she went slowly, behind her moving hams” (4 171-172). This objectifying outlook leads to the lack of control over his body which prompts Joyce to employ third-person narration to describe what Bloom actually does. There is an evident change in Joyce’s writing: From usage of the pronoun “I” in represented speech and thought to use of “it” in a narrative discourse, “His hand accepted the moist tender gland… then it fetched up three coins from his trousers’ pocket” (179-182). This conscious lack of awareness on Bloom’s behalf of his own bodily actions, as depicted through an
altered narrative, demonstrates Joyce’s clear distinction between the object based corporeality and its divide from reality. This rift is apparent in his day-to-day actions where his sentiments, “felt the flowing qualm spread over him” (449) and “felt heavy, full” (460), are immediately followed by object based actions respectively: “Lips kissed, kissing, kissed. Full gluey woman’s lips” (450) and “A gentle loosening of his bowels […] Better be careful not to get these trousers dirty for the funeral” (460, 494-5). Stephen’s subjective corporal experience was limited by continuous repetition of distracting sensory imagery and lack of focus on the emotional progress because of the self-impact based corporeality. Here, Bloom’s objectified corporeality brings about a compromised control over his own corpus due to the continual focus on objectified people and inanimate entities. This limitation is again highlighted as Bloom’s “hands and face were working…when she revealed all her gracefully beautiful legs” (13 365). Bloom’s lack of control over his corporal actions, as a result of the mental separation serves as a limitation of his objective outlook because simple indications from the opposite sex prompt him to disregard any impacts upon himself and begins masturbating in the church during a religious procession. The advanced and multi-faceted narrative allows Joyce to document the gap between objective corporeality and the actuality to build an all-encompassing theory on corporeality that is not only more comprehensive, as it goes beyond just subjective vs objective, but also requires greater command of the literary technique of represented speech and thought.

It is argued by scholars that the corporal experience serves to demonstrate the epic nature in which the human body is represented. But I think that focusing only on the following aspect does not paint a full picture. The two forms of corporeality that are extracted from the represented speech and thought of Dedalus and Bloom establish the two polar extremes of the human body experience. In agreement with my argument on a disconnect between Bloom’s
reality and his body, Maud Ellmann argues in *Ulysses: The Epic of the Human Body* that Joyce achieves an ironic effect through the human body’s routine and monotonous actions that aids in the development of a more comprehensive theory on corporeality. Focusing solely on Bloom’s objectivity, the object based experience of the human body depends not upon the importance of impacts upon the mind but rather on the actual actions, structures and behaviors of the objects, including both the human body as an object and the material entities in his surroundings. Ellmann highlights that cloacal obsessions directed from a day-to-day task could portray an extreme end of the spectrum of corporeality to advance the satire on the human body:

“He kicked open the crazy door of the jakes. Better be careful not to get these trousers dirty for the funeral. […] Quietly he read, restraining himself … yielding but resisting… Midway, his last resistance yielding, he allowed his bowels to ease themselves quickly … *(U 4 472-517)*” Joyce treats us to an unabridged account of this everyday heroic act. Affirming Bloom’s insight that the squalor of the scene is counterbalanced by the immaculate precision of Joyce’s prose. (Brown 58-59)

The gargantuan proportions to which the corporal experiences are exaggerated while maintaining the mundane nature of the plot conveys the ironic sense of the human body serving as the center stage for an Aristotelian epic. Concurrently, however, the lack of control one has over his human experience allows for a sense of relatability with the characters whereby the natural tendencies to be grossed out by repelling imagery and the basic human selfish desires limit an individual’s experience in their respective corpus. Such employment of represented speech and thought to lay a juxtaposition between the two forms of corporeality helps in the development of a broader idea of the human body experience and extends the narrative style towards deeper connection with the characters. Ellmann proceeds towards this “investigation of the circulatory systems in Bloom’s visit to the outhouse” (58) which falls in line with the sense of irony that such hyperbole imparts whereby a repetitive and often unremarkable task becomes an “heroic act” (59). The gross and gargantuan depiction of the human body as simply a vessel in Bloom’s objective reality where
the body is simply responsible for consumption and excretion vastly contradicts the subjective viewpoint portrayed by Stephen whose bodily experience is heavily motivated by impact of external objects upon his mind rather than the human body itself playing the role. This juxtaposition of the two protagonists establishes the contrast and bring the reader to relate on some level to both representations of speech and thought. I agree that such a representation of a mundane task imparts greater relatability with the reader but I would hold to the argument that this aspect does not merely serve to glorify a routine task but also to show the stark gap between Bloom’s interactions with his surroundings and what actually proceeds in his mental state of mind. This “heroic act” that Ellmann mentioned is perhaps more effective in portraying how an ordinary person successfully relates to the mundaneness and extends the ironic commentary of an epic that began in the analysis of Stephen’s subjective corporeality.

The central argument of this paper has developed beyond just the simply ironic effect that Joyce induces through such a monotonous epic and the argument has been focused in the direction of examining the development of a new narrative in Joyce’s work that allows for corporeality to encompass a wider set of phenomena. After drawing the apparent distinction between the two forms of corporeality, it becomes evident that objective corporeality in severely handicapped in the connection between the mental state of mind and the body itself. The represented speech and thought, in this case, fell short in explaining the continual lack of control that Bloom has upon his bodily actions when his mind is busy objectifying people in his surroundings. Therefore, the experience of living in a body with an objectifying state of mind exposes the gap between the mind and the body. Prebul, in her dissertation, “Joyce’s Sexual Manifesto: Sex and Sexuality in James Joyce’s Ulysses” explores this gap and describes it as a lack of balance between two aspects of Leopold Bloom:
In tending to his natural instincts and desires, Bloom is able to achieve equanimity in his life, a “reciprocal equilibrium between the bodily organism and its attendant circumstances” (Ulysses, 603). Bloom’s sexual encounters not only provide a reprieve from his social exclusion and cuckoldry, but his sexual expression also allows him to find a balance or equanimity between his existence and his body. (Prebul 11)

She argues that there is a purpose behind the continual focus on sexual behaviors that not only gives greater dimension and characterization to the protagonists to serve as “portals of self-discovery” but it could also explain the aspect I argue: the missing link between a person’s objective outlook and their body. The concept of “balance” that Prebul brings up is complementary to the narrative technique that Joyce uses to bridge this gap. The experience of living in the human body is shared amongst all but it varies in the extent to which one is more subjective or objective. While papers by scholars like Ellmann allow and understanding of Joyce’s epic mockery, reading between the lines of Joyce’s text highlights an important gap between the state of mind and the actions of the human body. While Prebul’s claim might help explain the manner in which Bloom surmounts the challenge of extreme objective corporeality, the existence of this divide can only be mediated in literature by adopting a novel style of narrative that Joyce has explored.
Works Cited

