

# The Carnivalesque Use of Numbers in James Joyce's *Ulysses*

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## ABSTRACT

The medieval culture gave great importance to numbers. Numbers like 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 12, 14 and 40 held great spiritual and symbolic significance during that time. Numbers were not only sacred to religion but also significant to art, science, astronomy, architecture, mathematics and music. Numbers were generally used to create order and maintain hierarchy in society. The concept of the 'golden ratio' or 'golden number' was maintained to create balance, visual appeal and harmony. The French Renaissance writer Francois Rabelais makes comic and distorted use of numbers in his novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel* against this religious and historical background.

The Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin in his book *Rabelais and His World* discusses the carnivalesque use of numbers, which undermines their original spiritual and symbolic significance. The highly exaggerated numbers used by Rabelais did not actually possess any religious or mystical value in his novel instead these numbers were linked to the abundance of carnival and they contributed to parody and carnival laughter. The carnival spirit mocked the sanctity and seriousness of the numbers by repetition and excess.

**Keywords:** Number, grotesque, stable, unstable, carnivalesque, decrowning, profanation, exaggeration, inversion

This paper attempts to make a comparison between the Renaissance writer Francois Rabelais and the modernist writer James Joyce in the carnivalesque use of numbers in their novels. Rabelais uses numbers profusely in his novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Joyce also uses numbers very profusely in his novel *Ulysses*. The exaggerated use of numbers by both writers not only produces humour in their novels but also gives these numbers an altogether different meaning. Most sacred numbers are stripped of their uniqueness and identity in a carnival atmosphere through profanation. Carnival flips all forms of hierarchy, discipline and measurement through inversion and exaggeration.

Numbers play a significant role in *Ulysses* as they help affirm certain facts that might have been overlooked if presented casually. Readers of *Ulysses* see that all the activities of *Ulysses* take place on one of the "dailiest days" possible in June 1904. But when we delve deeper into the 'significance' of the day June 16, we realise that Joyce is trying to immortalise a personal moment of his life by giving a mythical significance to this number. June 16 is recorded as the first dating day with his lover Nora Barnacle who later became his wife. Thus, an ordinary day in Dublin is exaggerated into a mythic day of human experience.

We hear several references to the number 16 in the novel. The repetition of this number gives it an ominous and grotesque significance. This date is very significant to Leopold Bloom, the hero of the novel. The normal day becomes very important for Bloom with the news of the arrival of his wife's lover, Blazes Boylan. The typist Martha Clifford in the novel is seen clicking on her typewriter 16 June 1904 (*Ulysses* 220). The reader also hears references to this date at the Barney Kiernan's inn (*Ulysses* 309). This date is also mentioned in the "Circe" episode (*Ulysses* 421).

Thus, an otherwise insignificant day is now etched in literature and is remembered and celebrated by Joyce fans as "Bloomsday." The day is celebrated now by retracing Leopold Bloom's wanderings through Dublin and with public readings and performances from *Ulysses*. This ordinary day is carnivalised and becomes a day of communal festivity and abundance.

By choosing an arbitrary day for the novel, Joyce breaks from the literary tradition of selecting a significant date for the events of the novel. The actions of the novel take place in about three-quarters of the day. To be precise, all the actions take place from 8 am of June 16 to 2 pm of June 17. Further, the novel begins and ends at odd hours. To follow the tradition of conventional sequence of narratives, the author could have started the novel anytime early in the morning and ended it immediately after evening or at midnight. The author extends his hero's journey deliberately into the next day only to eliminate any sort of predictability in the novelistic action that is typically associated with the traditional aesthetics.

Joyce sets the action of his novel in the 18 hours of a very casual day only to show what happens the next day is merely a continuation of today. The novel has 18 episodes paralleling 24 chapters of Homer's *Odyssey*. The 18 chapters of the novel are compressed and they reimagine the ancient epic in the modern context. All the events including the meals, the church bells, the tram rides and other activities of the day fuse with the mythic structure of the novel. Thus, this casual number gets an extraordinary significance in the novel.

The critic Marylyn French is of the opinion that the numbers 16 and 22 have a symbolic significance in *Ulysses* (French 194-95). We read in the novel that Bloom "fell" 22 years ago when he was 16 (*Ulysses* 525). Stephen Dedalus is now 22 and there is an age difference of 16 years between Bloom and Stephen. The number 16 which appears in the "Eumeaus" episode is also symbolic of homosexual solidarity.

The other significant dates, months and numbers used in Joyce's novel are September 8 and the numbers 3, 5, 7 and 9. Molly Bloom's birthday falls on the eighth of September. This day is celebrated universally as the nativity of Blessed Virgin Mary. The use of this number in the novel gives undertones of purity and divinity associated with Mother Mary to Molly. But we know that the character of Molly in the novel does not possess any of these virtues of Mother Mary.

The number 8 referring to the "eight beatitudes" in the Bible are the blessings mentioned by Jesus Christ in his sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5: 3-11). They describe the spiritual virtues that lead to salvation. But Joyce mentions the 8 drunken intellectuals Dixon, Madden, Crotthers, Costello, Lenehan, Bannon, Mulligan and Lynch (*Ulysses* 479) gathered at the maternity hospital parodically as the 8 beatitudes. Maybe Joyce is trying to expose the hypocrisy and duality of human existence which coexist in human nature by ridiculing the religious virtues.

The number 3 is very sacred to the Christians, as the number 3 symbolises the three members of the Trinity. Jesus resurrected from the dead on the third day of crucifixion. This number is very often ridiculed and profaned in *Ulysses*. Mulligan blesses the tower thrice before starting the black mass (*Ulysses* 1). Stephen listens to the bawdy and blasphemous ballad of the Joking Jesus "Three times a day, after meals" (*Ulysses* 19). Bloom pays three pence for the kidneys (*Ulysses* 57) and lends 3 bobs to Joe Hynes (*Ulysses* 115) and owes three shillings to O' Grady (*Ulysses* 99).

The mystical number 5 is parodied everywhere in the novel. The number 5 is very important to the Catholic faith as there are 5 stigmata on the body of Jesus Christ. In the novel, the character Paddy has 5 children. The number 7 is yet another number sacred to the Christians as there are 7 holy sacraments, 7 dolours for Mother Mary, 7 gifts of the Holy Spirit and so on. Hippocrates considered 7 as a "critical number of the whole world" and of the human organism (*Rabelais* 463). Bloom is asked to wash 7 piss pots of the whores (*Ulysses* 505) in the novel. 9 is a perfect number and perhaps to indicate the idea of perfection associated with traditional love, the Purefoys have 9 children! What happens with all these important and sacred numbers is that they are disrobed of their sanctity. and tilted from their numerical stability. But these numbers are renewed as new numbers possessing a new vigour.

Bloom's age is never directly mentioned in the novel. The novel states that Bloom will be "70 in 1936 and he is 16 years senior to Stephen" (*Ulysses* 632). Since the actions of the novel take place on 16 June, the readers assume that Bloom is now 38 years old. Molly thinks that Bloom is "getting on to forty" (*Ulysses* 691). 40 is a very important number in Christianity as it evokes the 40 days of penance of Jesus Christ and the 40<sup>th</sup> day of resurrection of Jesus.

James Joyce makes grotesque use of numbers in highlighting the age difference between Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus. The description becomes so complex that it resembles a mathematical equation or a riddle to be solved. Joyce describes the ages of Stephen and Bloom as follows:

16 years before in 1888 when Bloom was of Stephen's present age Stephen was 6. 16 years after in 1920 when Stephen would be of Bloom's present age Bloom would be 54. In 1936 when Bloom would be 70 and Stephen 54 their ages initially in the ratio 16 to 0 would be 17 1/2 to 13 1/2, the proportion increasing and the disparity diminishing arbitrary as future years were added for if the proportion existing in 1883 and had continued immutable, conceiving that to be possible, till then 1904 when Stephen was 22 Bloom would be 374 and in 1920 when Stephen would have attained the maximum postdiluvian age of 70 Bloom, being 1190 years alive having been born in the year 714, would have surpassed by 221 years the maximum antediluvian age, that of Methusala, 969 years, while, if Stephen would continue to live until he would attain that age in the year 3072 A.D., Bloom would have been obliged to have been alive 83,300 years, having been obliged to have been born in the year 81,396 B.C. (*Ulysses* 632).

The comparison of the ages of two ordinary figures in Dublin to the biblical figure of Methusalah heightens the humour in this context. The parody of the biblical style of writing decrowns the biblical style and crowns a new style of writing. The flamboyant description of Bloom's body weight also creates humour. This description ridicules the kind of details found in the pages of a history book. Bloom's body weight thus acquires grandiose dimensions and the seemingly precise but confusing and unnecessary details cross even the limits of hyperbole and evoke laughter in the reader:

By his body's known weight of eleven stone and four pounds in avoirdupois measure, as certified by the graduated machine for periodical self weighing in the premises of Francis Freedman, pharmaceutical chemist of 19 Frederick street north, on the last feast of Ascension, to wit, the twelfth day of May of the bissextile year one thousand nine hundred and four of the Christian era, (Jewish era five thousand six hundred and sixtyfour, Mohamadan era one thousand three hundred and twenty two), golden number 5, epact 13, solar cycle 9, dominical letter CB, Roman indication 2, Julian period 6617, MXMIV (*Ulysses* 621-22).

The first sentence of the above passage alone will give the weight of Bloom. Joyce's wit exaggerates this trivial description to gigantic magnitude and the "pretense to exactitude" confuses the reader. The numbers like 19, 5, 13, 6617 mentioned in the description are ridiculous and hence carnivalesque in nature.

Joyce makes use of several numbers to present the facts relating to the strained conjugal relation between Bloom and his wife, Molly:

[...] marriage had been celebrated 2 calendar months after the 18<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her birth (8 September 1870), viz. 8 October, and consummated on the same date with female issue born 15 June 1889, having been anticipatorily consummated on the 10 September of the same year and complete carnal intercourse, with ejaculation of semen within the natural female organ, having last taken place 5 weeks previous, viz 27 November 1893, to the birth on 29 December 1893 of second (and only male) issue, deceased 9 January 1895, aged 11 days, there remained a period of 10 years, 5 months and 18 days during which carnal intercourse had been incomplete, without ejaculation of semen within the natural female organ (*Ulysses* 687-88).

The passage simply means that it is now 10 years, 5 months and 18 days since their last coition. But Joyce exaggerates this incident to such grandiose proportion so that it acquires grotesque nature. Joyce's use of both rounded numbers and unstable numbers produces comedy through hyperbole. What is decrowned here is not just the numbers but also the writing style itself. Ultimately, this produces laughter, which is the true trait of carnival.

## **CONCLUSION**

Finite, rounded and symmetrical numbers were the conception of the universe as a static whole. Both Rabelais and Joyce did not believe in the stability and sanctity of numbers and they used the numbers in a comic manner to strip them of any importance given to them. Sometimes some digits added to or subtracted from the grotesquely exaggerated number might give stability to the grotesque numbers mentioned in the novels. Instead, Rabelais and Joyce dealt with an infinite and asymmetrical set of numbers. In the carnival atmosphere, the numbers are deliberately maintained unstable to retain the comic effect of the number. By using highly exaggerated and unstable numbers, these writers decrowned the ancient notions of order and sanctity of numbers, giving the numbers regeneration and rebirth in a truly carnival spirit.

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