



2000

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Recommended Citation

Mealiff '00, Tim (2000) "Are Adam and Eve Growing Old? Fertility Leitmotif in Ulysses," *Undergraduate Review*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/rev/vol12/iss1/9>

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Are Adam and Eve Growing Old? Fertility *Leitmotif* in *Ulysses*

By *Tim Mealiff*

In multiple instances throughout *Ulysses*, James Joyce incorporates symbolic structures and themes that, in each of their recurrences, offer a shifting interpretation and perception of their role within the whole of the text. Either in a repeated theme or phrase, or in the form of a *leitmotif* which builds in structure and complexity, the multiple manifestations often induce varied perceptions for both Leopold Bloom and the Reader which remain in a Protean flux throughout the work. Joyce uses the contextual tool to introduce such ideas, adding significance to both the scene and the mood in which themes play themselves out. This sets up a cause and effect relationship surrounding the *leitmotif* which events and thoughts give rise to the incorporation of a specific symbolic structure, and what attitudes and opinions result from its reintroduction at various points in the day. In addition to context, Joyce's use of language in establishing thematic associations is worth attention. Often the language of the text dictates certain perceptions to the Reader, raising the question of who is the speaker and who is the audience. The notion of Agendath Netaim is one such example of Joyce's use of this thematic device, as context, language and the notion of speaker and audience aid in perpetuating the multiple recurrences and varied interpretations of this thematic structure.

Before Joyce even introduces the idea of Agendath Netaim, he has already established several ideas and symbolic associations that work in conjunction with the *leitmotif*. Stephen's "Proteus" chapter in the *Telemachiad* has already introduced the notion of man's natural connection with the original man and woman—Adam and Eve. Like the telephone, the naval cord serves as a connection between humans, not only within Dublin on 16 June 1904, but throughout humanity back to the Garden of Eden (or, as Stephen introduces it, "Edenville,"). Early in their introduc-

tion to the Reader, both Bloom and Molly are presented as outsiders to Ireland—Molly having come from Gibraltar, and Bloom whose Jewish heritage presents him as a “dark figure” within Dublin society. The Reader also observes early on that their marriage is not necessarily a satisfying one, and that their marital problems will take prominence in the course of the text. Bloom’s first recollection of the sexual encounter with Molly at Howth Hill introduces the notion of natural beauty and inevitably links this with the idea of fertility—both of the natural landscape and of their sexual relationship. The Reader, in turn, is allowed to associate this notion of nature and fertility with the Garden of Eden, as Bloom and Molly become Adam and Eve—every man and every woman. And Joyce’s prevalent use of the debate between the Real and the Ideal, often manifested in the rapid shifts between internal thoughts and the external environment, places the notion of ideal natural fertility (represented by Agendath Netaim) at odds with the more obvious perception of Dublin as a wasteland—containing both a sense of natural sterility and a sexual abstinence between Bloom and Molly. Therefore, Joyce has inescapably linked the symbolism of Agendath Netaim and natural fertility with the health of the marriage of Leopold and Molly Bloom.

Despite these established symbolic and thematic structures, Joyce’s initial introduction of Agendath Netaim, like many of his other *leifmotifs*, is subtle. He presents the idea in a manner that seemingly attaches little emotion or weighty significance to its role in Bloom’s day. Because Agendath Netaim appears initially as a newspaper advertisement which Bloom merely glances at during his breakfast shopping, the language in which Bloom relates it takes on a neutral and factual tone—one which he, as an advertiser himself, can look upon with professional criticism. Indeed, this initial reaction contains much ironic foreshadowing: “Nothing doing. Still an idea behind it” (49). On the surface, the advertisement is ineffectual in Bloom’s mind, but might be worth further thought at a later time. However, the Reader immediately observes the imaginative scene that Agendath Netaim produces in Bloom’s thoughts. Although he may not be fully conscious of the fact, Bloom has immediately associated the notion of fertile land in Asia Minor with his sexual relationship with Molly. He imagines Agendath’s product as “nice to hold, cool waxen fruit, hold in the hand, lift it to the nostrils and smell the perfume” (49). This parallel to his thoughts of Molly’s breasts and their scene on Howth Hill recurs many times throughout the text. Also recurrent is Bloom’s ceaseless practicality and business-sense, as he figures the lucrative possibilities of a fertile

orchard in association with the financial possibilities of Molly's whoring.

Amidst Bloom's wandering thoughts, however, Joyce shifts the scene (the literal atmosphere) by placing a cloud in front of the sun, which immediately shifts the nature and tone of Bloom's imagination in a more negative direction. The chasm between the Real and Ideal becomes acute for Bloom, who instantly denies the actualization of the Ideal, favoring a sterile scene of Agendath Netaim as "a barren land, bare waste" (50). He embellishes upon the association by connecting it with notions of the Dead Sea, the history of Jewish captivity, and the notion of Zion as an old, sterile woman: "Dead: an old woman's: the grey sunken cunt of the world" (50).¹ His thoughts are aptly summed up as "Desolation," and he consciously returns to the Real stating, "Well, I am here now. Yes, I am here now" (50). For the moment Bloom's imaginative associations have ended with a stark return to reality, but there most definitely exists "an idea behind it," which will manifest itself periodically throughout his day.

Although Agendath makes a few appearances soon after its initial introduction (like on the way to Bloom's first fertile creation. . . in the toilet), its reappearance in "Lestrygonians" furthers its thematic growth in the text. Joyce's use of context is again important, as Bloom's return to the idea accompanies his thoughts of identity and sexual abstinence. Bloom's feeling of captivity is well stated by the fateful phrase, "Useless to go back. Had to be" (138). Bloom sees his situation as beyond his control, which is supported by Joyce's use of language in this scene; Bloom's sexual relationship "could never be like it again after Rudy" (137). However, his thoughts of gifts for Molly, accompanied by the "high voices," and "sunwarm silk," cause Bloom to return to the idea of "rich fruits spicy from Jaffa" (138). And although Agendath Netaim as "wealth of the world" carries materialistic overtones, Bloom quickly returns to thoughts of sexual fertility, as "a warm human plumpness settled down on his brain" (138). He returns to images of his sexual encounter with Molly and of the "perfume of embraces . . . he mutely craved to adore," (138) but the distances he still harbors between imagination and reality force his sexual cravings to be articulated through a physical hunger, as he "must eat. . . Feel better then" (138).²

Arguably, Agendath Netaim achieves its most desolate associations (at least in Bloom's mind) with its reintroduction in "Oxen of the Sun." Like its previous appearance in Nausicaa, the theme enters Bloom's thoughts while he is in a dreamstate. Bloom has been recollecting his first sexual experience, with Birdie Kelly, which harbored thoughts of paternity for

him. His affair did not produce any offspring, nor has his marriage to Molly provided him a son, as "there is none now to be for Leopold, what Leopold was for Rudolph" (338). Understandably, this puts Bloom in a foul mood, as evidenced by the tone of his thoughts of fruitlessness and infertility. The thematic correspondence having been well established, it comes as little surprise that his thoughts return to Agendath Netaim. Fitting well into the context and tone of his desolate thoughts, Bloom by this point in the text views the theme most negatively, as "Agendath Netaim is a waste land, a home of screechows and the sandblind upupa. Netaim, the golden, is no more" (338). Bloom is fully aware of Molly's encounter with Blazes Boylan at this point, and his feelings of sterility, age and helplessness abound. And as in "Lestrygonians," Bloom connects the Agendath/fertility theme with the notion of cattle and the slaughterhouse (which may have caused his temporary vegetarianism), at this point in their march to the Dead Sea to take a drink of the "salt somnolent inexhaustible flood" (338). As Bloom's fatigue of the day becomes greater, so does the relationship between his perception of Dublin reality and the idealistic notions of fertility as provided by Agendath Netaim become more strained and foreign.

In fact, by the time of Bloom's departure from the text into his final dreamstate, he has achieved little resolution regarding the fertility debate, which Agendath Netaim proposes. Joyce provides the Reader, as well, with little more hope of resolution with the theme by the end of "Ithaca." Therefore, it becomes thematically necessary that Agendath Netaim reenter the text one final time within Molly's soliloquy. For obvious reasons, the actual term is never stated in "Penelope," for Molly has not seen the advertisement, but the same symbolic associations appear at the climax of her soliloquy that recur to Bloom throughout the day. Molly recalls the meeting on Howth Hill with similar fondness, and with imagery easily associative with the Jaffa orchards. She speaks of "the Greeks and the jews and the Arabs. . . the poor donkeys . . . and those handsome Moors all in white and turbans like kings," as well as "the figtrees in the Alameda gardens" (643). The Reader has no trouble seeing the connections of Agendath Netaim and sexual fertility with Molly's orgasmic reminiscence. Indeed, Molly's soliloquy provides resolution (if not for Bloom, then for the Reader) to the often-tortured theme of sexuality and fertility in the relationship between Bloom and Molly, as the contrast between its last manifestation and the initial introduction of Agendath Netaim in the text is formidable. Though they hardly share a bed, this couple—every man and every woman—at

least share a memory of sexual fulfillment accompanied by natural fertility. And for readers of James Joyce, this is no small optimistic concession.

NOTES

¹At this point I would propose (though I have seen no other corresponding interpretations) that Agendath—which according to Don Gifford is a misspelling of Agudath (74)—takes on a specific wordplay. Bloom associates the term with “age and death,” which accompany its repetition throughout the text, illustrating not only his feeling of hopelessness of a successful Zion, but of more personal concerns with his own vitality and fertility.

²It might be worth noting that Bloom considers a vegetarian lunch at this point, in hopes of experiencing the “fine flavour of things from the earth” (140). And without overanalyzing the text, I would put forth that his cheese sandwich made with Gorgonzola—a product of Italy, situated between Gibraltar and Jaffa—might have some symbolic significance.

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