

A Concise Plot Summary of *Ulysses*

Created by Neil Smith for [BBC News Online](#). Citations refer to the 1986 Gabler edition.

PART I: THE TELEMACHIAD (THE BOOK OF TELEMACHUS)

1. Telemachus (pp. 3-19)

8:00 a.m., at the Martello tower at Sandycove (on the shore of Dublin Bay, seven miles southeast of the center of Dublin).

Stephen Dedalus, in part a self-portrait of the author, has just returned to Ireland from his studies in Paris (to which he was headed at the end of Joyce's preceding work, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*). He shares lodgings with a medical student, Buck Mulligan, in the Martello tower at Sandycove, and the book opens with a rooftop exchange between Stephen and the irreverent Mulligan. Stephen has been kept awake by the nighttime ravings of Mulligan's friend Haines, an Englishman with bad dreams, and wants to know when the latter is leaving. He also complains to Mulligan about his (Mulligan's) distasteful comment on the recent death of Stephen's mother. The two then go downstairs for breakfast with Haines. They leave the tower together for the swimming hole, where Mulligan, like a good usurper, asks the work-bound Stephen for his key and some money and sets a date for them to meet at half-past noon (to spend more of the latter's earnings).

2. Nestor (pp. 20-30)

10:00 a.m., at Mr. Deasy's school for Protestant boys in the Dublin suburb of Dalkey.

We find Stephen at work attempting, with little optimism or success, to teach a history class. As the apathetic and unruly bunch quickly disperses for hockey, a lone lingerer named Sargent makes his cautious way to the teacher's desk for help with his arithmetic, and Stephen sees in the boy a pathetic portrait of his own youth. Then Stephen suffers his turn as pupil, receiving along with his salary a tedious lecture from the pompous Mr. Deasy, who then enlists Stephen's help in getting a tedious letter of his published in the press.

3. Proteus (pp. 31-42)

11:00 a.m., at Sandymount Strand (the beach near the mouth of the river Liffey).

Stephen wanders the beach, thinking of his past, his family (especially his dead mother), and the constant change and uncertainty of life. He knows he is seeking something, something that cannot be found in family life, in intellectual pursuits, but he still does not know what that something is. Stephen realizes the difficulty of connecting with other people, but also senses that he is part of the cycle of life and death. He sees this in the movement of the ocean and his own urination, and as he moves off down the beach, thinking of drowned men, we are ready for the next part of the book.

PART II: THE ODYSSEY (THE WANDERINGS OF ULYSSES)

4. Calypso (pp. 45-57)

8:00 a.m., at Leopold and Molly Bloom's house at 7 Eccles Street, Dublin.

We finally meet Odysseus himself in his modern manifestation as Leopold Bloom, an endearing unheroic 38-year-old Dublin-born Jew of Hungarian ancestry who canvasses newspaper advertisements for a living. We see him first at home and follow him on his domestic morning chores, buying himself a kidney at the butcher's, delivering to his wife Molly a breakfast in bed with the morning mail (including, he notices, a note from her impresario Blazes Boylan, with whom she will have a romantic rendezvous at the house later in the day). Back down in the kitchen he reads a letter from their daughter Milly, then visits the outhouse in great detail before finally embarking upon his long-day's wandering through the city on business, pleasure, respectful attendance at Dignam's funeral, and the pursuit of not being at home when his wife's lover calls.

5. Lotus-Eaters (pp. 58-71)

10:00 a.m., at various spots including Sir John Rogerson's Quay, Westland Row post office, and Leinster Street baths.

Bloom visits the post office under his pseudonym Henry Flower to pick up a letter from his sentimentally amorous pen pal "Martha Clifford." On his way to read the letter he bumps into the tiresome McCoy, whose conversation he suffers long enough to indulge himself in a pleasant voyeuristic distraction concerning an attractive woman boarding a carriage across from them. McCoy notices Bloom's mourning attire and learns of Paddy Dignam's funeral, asking Bloom to put his name down as having attended. McCoy out of the way, Bloom reads the letter, then allows himself a few minutes' repose in All Hallows church where, watching the service, he muses upon religion to humorous ironic effect. On his way out Bloom decides to make use of the little time left before the funeral to get Molly's lotion from the chemist. He buys a bar of soap for himself and walks towards the baths. He is interrupted by Lyons, who asks to see Bloom's newspaper to look up a horse running that day. Lyons mistakes Bloom's offer to give him the paper—"I was going to throw it away"—as a tip on the "dark horse" Throwaway.

6. Hades (pp. 72-95)

11:00 a.m., at Prospect Cemetery in Glasnevin, north of Dublin.

Bloom's odyssey through Dublin continues now by carriage (accompanied by Cunningham, Power and Stephen's father Simon Dedalus) to the cemetery to attend Dignam's funeral. Hynes the reporter buttonholes Bloom about the identity of a mystery man wearing a Mackintosh coat. Death is everywhere in this episode, explored from various perspectives via Bloom's rambling, often fumbling ruminations on the nuts and bolts of spiritual beliefs and rites, and of decomposition and renewal.

7. Aeolus (pp. 96-123)

12:00 noon, at the newspaper offices of the Freeman's Journal (and the Evening Telegraph), the vicinity of the General Post Office, and Nelson's Pillar.

In this humorous study of hot air, we discover Bloom pursuing a few minutes of actual work as he visits the newspaper to negotiate an ad for a client (the grocer Keyes). The editor's office is bustling with the confabulation among a changing consortium of hangers-on discussing the history of oration, rhetoric and journalism. Simon Dedalus leaves and is replaced by Stephen (with Deasy's letter), who recites his "Parable of the Plums." Crawford, impatient for a drink, waves Bloom off, describing to him the precise location of his royal Irish anatomy the latter's client Keyes may kiss.

8. Lestrygonians (pp. 124-150)

1:00 p.m., at Davy Byrne's Pub and the National Museum.

The subject of food and eating is explored here with the detailed attention afforded death and decomposition two episodes ago. We follow Bloom through a panoply of lunchtime noises and smells and their associations in search of an aesthetically satisfying bite. Along the way, he bumps into Josie Breen, who updates him on the unpleasant status of her own life with her lunatic husband. Bloom also learns from her about Mina Purefoy, who's been in the maternity hospital three days already, and demonstrates his characteristic empathy. Feeling relaxed and satisfied from a cheese sandwich and glass of burgundy at Davy Byrne's, he takes a walk, helps a blind man cross the street, and ducks into the National Museum (to avoid bumping into his wife's prospective lover).

9. Scylla and Charybdis (pp. 151-179)

2:00 p.m., at the National Library.

Meanwhile, not far from Bloom, we find Stephen at the National Library, hard at work selling his *Hamlet* theory to another hardworking group of literati. Shakespeare, it is suggested, was father not merely of his own children but of his own grandfather, a ghostly father of all his race. Stephen sees Shakespeare's work, pervaded as it is by the themes of usurpation, adultery and exile, as an art born from the anguish of impotence. The quasi-Socratic dialogue, pitting Aristotle (Stephen) against his teacher Plato (the mystic A. E. Russell), is interrupted by the spirited arrival of the profane Mulligan, who has just come through the Museum, where he noticed Bloom.

10. Wandering Rocks (pp. 180-209)

3:00 p.m., along the streets of Dublin.

This episode comprises nineteen separate passages, each a short poetic sketch of a scene or event happening somewhere in Dublin. Some of these episodes, though seemingly unrelated, appear to be happening simultaneously, affording the reader the sense of a wide-angle lens through which the whole city may be viewed. This unification of disparate elements is effected the more tellingly by the culminating scene, wherein a viceregal procession is depicted as observed by many of the characters individually portrayed.

11. Sirens (pp. 210-239)

About 4:00 p.m., at The Concert Room (saloon at the Ormond Hotel).

Musical logic dictates the structure, sense and exhilaration of this episode, which begins with an overture (composed, as in traditional opera, from themes, motifs, and highlights of the action to come) and proceeds through a fugal handling of voices, ideas, taps of a blind man's cane, and nostalgic wisps of sentimental song. We follow Bloom into the Ormond Bar where he witnesses Boylan flirting with the Sirens (the seductive barmaids Miss Douce and Miss Kennedy) before departing for his conquest of our hero's wife. Bloom's impotence to intervene and prevent his cuckoldry, together with his fascination with his adversary, skillfully maintains a subtle but pervasive tension and a haunting poignance.

12. Cyclops (pp. 240-283)

5:00 p.m., at Barney Kiernan's pub.

One of the funniest chapters of a supremely funny book, “Cyclops” maintains its ironic humor with the help of a thoroughly unreliable narrator—a bitter, petty barfly equipped with a sardonic outlook and an exquisite sense for the cliché. The “I” narrator’s account is interrupted by the voice of another narrator—one countering “I”’s vigorous deflations with equally preposterous inflations (in the form of amusing descriptions of Rabelaisian proportions). Among those so described is “the citizen,” a worn-out patriotic bigot in an eyepatch who plays Polyphemus to Bloom’s Odysseus. Jewish Bloom finds himself in unwelcome territory in this drunken den of nationalist bigotry. Distracted over the scene he imagines (correctly) to be transpiring at his home, Bloom allows himself to be drawn into an argument with the anti-Semitic “citizen.” Even Bloom’s very presence in the pub is misunderstood. He has come to meet Cunningham so that the two of them can visit Dignam’s widow with an offer of help; yet he is perceived as having come only to collect his winnings on Throwaway. Finally, when Bloom fails to pick up a round of drinks, the atmosphere of suspicion about him ignites into a confrontation over nationalism and intolerance given in comically cosmic dimensions, and our hero is whisked away from catastrophe by Cunningham “like a shot off a shovel.”

13. Nausicaa (pp. 284-313)

8:00 p.m., at the rocks on Sandymount Strand.

We return to the beach that served as stage for Stephen’s earlier musings and finds Bloom there pondering his perception (markedly less theoretical) of young Gerty MacDowell and her underwear. Even less concerned with philosophy is Gerty, who gleans she is the object of [a] man’s desire and happens to be quite busy living up to her objectification. When her group runs off in pursuit of the nearby fireworks display, she stays behind, soaking up the male gaze and feeding it with more and more view of leg until the exploding Roman candles overhead mimic Bloom’s ejaculation. Meanwhile, anthem-like strains of organ and men’s voices are heard emanating from a nearby church to remind us there is a temperance retreat in progress. When Gerty gets up from the rock and lamely limps away, we are left with Bloom alone on the dim-lit beach in a guilt-tainted postmasturbatory reverie, reflecting on women and sexuality with his characteristic concreteness, providing a complementary foil to Gerty’s ruminations on the subject.

14. Oxen of the Sun (pp. 314-349)

10:00 p.m., at the National Maternity Hospital, Holles Street.

Bloom continues his circuitous avoidance of home, hearth and Blazes Boylan by paying a call on Mina Purefoy, whom he knows to be experiencing a difficult birth. At the hospital he runs into a group of young carousers including Stephen, who happens to be avoiding his homecoming as well on account of his own problem with usurpers. Bloom once again finds himself to be an outsider looking in on an unwelcoming society. His concern for the well-being of his surrogate (spiritual) son, Stephen, prompts him to linger on well past the delivery of the baby until the doctor is free to leave with the gang for the nearest pub. The language in which the episode lives creates a masterful portrait of the English language itself, evolving as it does from the highly convoluted and ponderous Latinate and Saxon stages through the various centuries of signature literary styles to the jargon-riddled commercial babble of modernity, perhaps the worse for wear with the help of an escalating rate of intoxication.

15. Circe (pp. 350-497)

12:00 midnight, at Bella Cohen's Brothel, Tyrone Street (in the red-light district Joyce called "nighttown").

In keeping with the late hour, high blood alcohol level, and magical powers of Homer's Circe, this episode is expressed largely in a hallucinatory manner that invites comparison with the metaphoric power of dream logic. Bloom and Stephen move freely in and out of a sorceress' world, where personages and fears from their recent and distant pasts are made manifest to them in a seamless process of metamorphosis, and put down on the page in dramatic form, replete with stage directions. Stephen heads for the red-light district and is followed by Bloom, who is concerned in a fatherly way over Stephen's well-being. In the house of Bella Cohen, Bloom flirts with Zoe, falls under the spell of the whoremistress Bella, and keeps watch over Stephen, who, after a traumatic hallucinatory visit from his deceased mother, attempts to break her hold on his psyche by smashing his walking stick against Bella's chandelier. Bloom pays Bella for the damage and follows Stephen into the street. Stephen is punched by a British soldier unimpressed by Stephen's rhetorical skills, and Bloom protects the unconscious recipient of that punch so that the latter might avoid falling into the custody of the police. The episode (and with it Part II, the "Odyssey" proper) ends poignantly with Bloom's vision of his own son Rudy (who had died eleven years ago at the age of eleven days) as he might have been in life, now eleven. By associating Rudy with Stephen at this point, the image powerfully reinforces the book's undercurrent theme of father and son in search of each other.

PART III: NOSTOS (THE HOMECOMING OF ULYSSES)

16. Eumaeus (pp. 501-543)

1:00 a.m., at the cabman's coffeehouse shelter beneath the Loop Line bridge.

Bloom escorts the revived Stephen to a nearby cabman's shelter in hopes of sobering the young man up and bringing him home to Eccles Street for a good night's sleep. The shelter is run by a reputed ex-Invincible known as "Skin-the-Goat," whose clientele are being entertained by the tattoos and tall tales of a sailor named Murphy, just back with a fresh batch of rare exploits on the ship Stephen watched that morning from the strand. Bloom's best efforts at communication with his newfound spiritual son are met with certain disappointments, beautifully emphasized by the episode's narrative technique, a prose style so hopelessly laden with subordinate clauses, derelict predicates, tireless wandering constructions, and delicious clichés that the reader yearns for bedtime more keenly than do the protagonists. Nevertheless, our hero is triumphant in his mission, and eventually leads the young bard through the vicissitudes of city life and tired language to safe harbor at Eccles Street.

17. Ithaca (pp. 544-607)

2:00 a.m., at Bloom's house (same as 4).

Bloom remembers he had forgotten to remember to take his key. Through the bird's-eye vantage afforded by a loftily impersonal third-person narrative, we watch Bloom climb over the railing and into the house to receive Stephen for a friendly cup of cocoa and conversation, a refused offer to stay the night, and a cordial parting urination together beneath the stars. After Stephen leaves, Bloom finds his way to bed past rearranged furniture, remembrances of his past life with his adulterous wife, and crumbs from the jar of potted meat brought that afternoon by the usurper of his

conjugal bed. Brushing away his predecessor's crumbs, the returning hero climbs into bed, head to his wife's feet, boldly orders himself an unprecedented breakfast in bed (as we learn in the next chapter), metaphorically vanquishes an imagined host of her suitors, and then plants a kiss on her plump behind before his embarkation for the Kingdom of Hypnos down into a tiny blot of unconsciousness in the space of a dot on the page.

18. Penelope (pp. 608-644)

Probably 3:00 or 4:00 a.m. (though unspecified).

The world is Molly's now; rather, Molly is the world now, and through the massive, evershifting sea of liquid prose that constitutes her monologue, we explore the yet-unseen sides of things limned throughout the book from other, largely male, perspectives. Washing up on shore from this freely-flowing tide of words (eight unpunctuated sentences totaling some nearly sixteen-hundred lines) are countless gems of insight into the psyche of Molly, Woman, and the world. Beginning with her surprise over Bloom's breakfast order and some random remembrances of life with her husband, she proceeds in reverie over her recent tryst, before seeing it in the context of her past and future life. Molly's review of her marriage and family, and before that her childhood on Gibraltar, gives way by turns to amusing ambivalent appraisals of men and women, as well as flights of romantic curiosity about younger men, like Stephen, before building to a great peroration of sustained lyrical sweep in affirmation of the pervasive power of love, of the reality of loss, and, yes, of her ultimate acceptance of the man she married (or at least the man he was when she married him). Yes.